

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a purple and white floral dress, looks back over her shoulder at a man. The man is seen from the back, wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark vest. The background is a warm, golden glow with soft bokeh lights.

CHIEF OF SINNERS



CARYL McADOO

A Texas Romance

Book Ten, 1926-1951

Praying my story gives God glory!

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CARYL
McADOO

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously..

□ 2017 by Caryl McAdoo

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Five Star Reviews on Chief of Sinners

Chief of Sinners is the tenth, and sadly, the final book from Caryl McAdoo's Texas Romance series. I have read and loved every one from this series and Chief of Sinners does not disappoint.

I believe this one is my favorite and found it to be the most gripping and emotional. Caryl McAdoo is such a talented author and knows how to write likeable characters that a reader can relate to. She, also, knows how to play on the reader's emotions.

I know there were a few times I wanted to grab a couple of tissues. I just could not stop reading. I had to know what was going to happen next. So many twists and turns involved.

Such a wonderful story that show the power of forgiveness, letting go, moving on and having second chances. The book is full of faith and inspiration. Christian Fiction can not get better than this.

Chief of Sinners is most definitely, in my opinion, a must read, and I highly recommend it. I can not wait to see what series the

author will come up with next.

100 stars! – Amy Campbell, reader

Caryl and Ron McAdoo's storytelling never ceases to amaze! At over 400 pages *Chief of Sinners* is a tome! Dealing with tough topics, I'd not categorize this book as a classic romance, nor is it chic lit, but it's definitely historical since the setting is before the Korean conflict.

Chief of Sinners rings true to life! The very believable characters, their struggles described in vivid terms, totally grab the imagination. This story is no sanitized, saintly Christian read. *Chief of Sinners* has no profanity, isn't sacrilegious, but does deal with issues like mental illness and infidelity.

(continued)

Chief of Sinners is so good that this read took me hostage. Couldn't put it down. Due to personal and family issues, it was one difficult, yet captivating, book to read. If you're looking for a sweet romance to cuddle up with, this isn't the book for you.

But if you loved the gritty, “Gone with the Wind,” you'll love “Chief of Sinners!”

– Cass Wessel, multi-published devotional author, and
wordsabouttheWord.com

Dedication

I first dedicate *CHIEF OF SINNERS* to my *Father in Heaven*, the Lover of my soul, and Giver of all things good. To Him I owe it all, and to Him I surrender all. Here's praying my story gives Him glory!

And secondly, *CHIEF OF SINNERS* is dedicated to the lover of my soul and flesh. The man God created in his mother's womb to love me and protect me, and take care of me, my dearest *husband Ron* who chose to spend his life with me when only sixteen-years-old. I am blessed.

Without either in my life . . . Well, I can't imagine and don't want to try!

This is a faithful saying, and
worthy of all acceptance, that Christ
Jesus came into the world to
save sinners; of whom I am chief.

1 Timothy 4:16

DISCLAIMER: Not all pastors—not even a majority of these servants of
God—of ANY denomination fall to temptations as presented herein.
All are sinners, of course, because they are just men. However,
because of their relationship with God, are Blood bought and forgiven!
Hallelujah!

Acknowledgements

AS in my dedication, I owe my *Father in Heaven* the first acknowledgement for how could I create anything without the gifts He's given me? Without Him, nothing I do would be worth a widow's mite. For all that CHIEF OF SINNERS is or I ever hope it to be, God gets all the glory!

And as many of you may have heard by now, I write with my husband Ron. Our New York agent and Simon and Schuster editor convinced us that only one name should be on the cover, and a female's would be best, which worked well for us.

Ron, the strong silent type, isn't a lover of marketing like I am. He verbally gave me all his part so I'd get used to saying 'my' stories instead of 'our' and 'I' instead of 'we'. One in the Lord; Ron's the reason I've such great heroes. He makes up for my every weakness as I do his.

I am blessed.

God gave me a wonderful book cover designer in Roseanna White. I'm so grateful to her for bringing my vision for CHIEF OF SINNERS to fruition. Again, I'm so blessed.

God also surrounded me with such a crowd of witnesses who read my stories and help me find my errors and typos. What would I do without Lenda Selph, so faithful and dear? And others: Cass Wessel, Louise Koiner, Joy Gibson, and more. I love you, ladies.

Without these beloved friends, y'all would have to excuse the uh-ohs, because writers read what it's supposed to say, and when there's over one hundred thirty thousand words, you can count on a few being typed in wrong, or maybe a little one left out!

And you, most treasured readers. I acknowledge you and appreciate you. More than you can know.

Fall 1926



od always tests His sons.

From Adam on, He's required absolute obedience from those He calls to greatness.

Such a man, Broderick Eversole Nightingale, known to all as Buddy, came into the world in the afterglow of the Azusa Street Revival. From his earliest memories, his father preached and practiced the power of the Holy Ghost while his saintly mother led the singing under the canvas canopy of the family's traveling Gospel meetings.

Buddy's first test came at the age of ten when his mother fell deathly ill. He never dreamed to blame God when she went home. But his father did. And for that first year after she left, the Reverend Nathaniel Nightingale drowned his sorrow in moonshine.

Broke of heart and pocketbook, the boy's father returned to the only solace he knew, preaching the Good News. Though he no longer invited people to come be healed, reports of past miracles and his fiery oratories always kept the revival tent full.

The second test came fourteen months later in a small Texas Hill Country community. That fateful day started like so many others.

After obtaining their permit, the Nightingales pulled into the fairgrounds, unloaded their tent, and began work. By midmorning, they had the canvas spread and the poles up.

Buddy held the first peg while his father tap-started it. He stood back. Five whacks later, he tied off the guy rope then scooted to the next peg. A second passed before he squinted against the sun and looked up at his dad.

For October, the day heated unseasonably warm, and the old reverend's face glistened with sweat as he leaned on the double-

headed mallet.

“What’s the matter, old man? Not getting tired, are you?”

“Who you calling old?”

Buddy smiled. “Here, let me have that thing. I wouldn’t want the great Nathaniel Nightingale too tuckered to preach tonight.”

“Have at it.”

Finding his spot, Buddy tap-started another peg then stood back and eyeballed the alignment. Perfect. Slowly he raised the oversized wooden hammer, held it a second over his head, then pulled down hard.

The hickory head hit the peg a glancing blow, and the mallet slipped from his hands. The stake flew one direction, the hammer another.

His dad laughed. “You practice a while, Little Man. I need a drink.”

Buddy restarted the peg and a dozen blows later had it in place. He tied off the rope then stepped back. Another fifteen pegs and the tent would be finished. Sure hoped coming to this one-horse town would be worth it.

The Lord knew they needed the money. He worked steadily setting the pegs.

“You not finished yet?”

He glanced up at his father. “Mine are all done, but some of yours need a little attention.”

The elder nodded. “Oh, I see how you are. Give me that mallet, boy. We’re burning daylight.”

An hour later, the wooden hammer slammed down on the last peg. Mopping his brow with his handkerchief, the old man flipped him a half-dollar. “Get you some dinner, Son. I’m going to catch some shut-eye.”

He pocketed the coin then tied off the last rope. Hands on his hips, he admired their work. The patch-on-patch tent didn’t look half bad. It’d last until they could afford a new one—maybe Mama’s next royalty check—provided the old man stopped giving away the tent money.

Working his way toward the square, Buddy nailed up flyers, then blew a dime of his dinner money on a Moon Pie and Coca-Cola. Marble Falls looked like a dozen other towns where his father had pitched the tent in the last year.

Figured if expenses got covered, it’d be a miracle.

A brand new ’26 Ford Coupe bouncing down Main Street caught his eye. Maybe there was some money to be had there after all. He decided to forget lunch and finish passing out the flyers.

The nicest homes surrounded the center of the Texas town, as in

most rural communities. Buddy skipped the first two streets, walking outward, since the well-to-do usually didn't truck with Holiness folks.

Episcopalians and Presbyterians looked down their noses at Pentecostals, while the more rigid Baptists and Methodists didn't look at all, preferring to pretend holy rollers simply didn't exist, not as a real church anyway.

Experience taught him the farther away from the square, the more receptive the people.

He gave away his last flyer and headed to the campgrounds where he busied himself arranging crates and two-by-twelve planks used for pews. The setup wasn't fancy, but that wasn't what God's children came for.

The old man claimed they came for more reasons than Buddy understood.

A bit before dusk, he lit the Coleman lanterns that hung from every other tentpole.

His stomach reminded him he'd only had a Moon Pie for lunch. He'd check the larder in the trailer. Judging by changes of hues in the orange and golden sky, should be time to fix something before he woke the old man.

Buddy ignored the snores and rummaged through the cupboard. A can of sardines, almost a whole line of crackers, and a fried pie later, he peeked out the curtain. Half a dozen cars and two wagons littered the gravel lot beyond the tent.

Not bad.

The faithful were coming. Hopefully, they brought some folding money in their bib overalls.

The rhythmic snorting and huffing echoed across the little trailer. A good long nap always meant a fiery sermon, and nothing touched a believer's purse like hell fire and brimstone. He peeked again.

A car's headlights illuminated a fair amount of foot traffic.

Better get the reverend up and at it. Time was a wasting. He poked his father. "Hey, sleepyhead, time for church."

The elder Nightingale turned to the wall. "Leave me alone."

"Come on, Dad. The tent's getting full."

The reverend rolled over. "Tell 'em I'm sick."

"Get up." He shook him. "They're coming to see you, the great Nathaniel Nightingale, renowned miracle worker and faith healer."

Nothing.

And mocking always got a rise.

Buddy sniffed then held his nose close to his father's mouth. "Oh, good grief."

He rolled him over. An empty Mason jar wedged between the bed and the wall slipped a notch.

“What am I supposed to do now?” He grabbed his father's shoulders and shook hard. “What have you gone and done? Get up.”

Twice more he shook and shouted, but didn't even get an ‘I'm sick’ from his dad. Buddy checked out the little window again. The tent was full, and folks were milling about. He had to face them, tell them something.

Faith healers weren't supposed to get sick.

Slowly, he changed into his meeting clothes, letting his mind run through a list of possible excuses.

If he'd only known.

Of course he should have figured it out.

Mercy! He straightened his string tie, threw his shoulders back like his mother had taught him, and sallied forth to meet the throng. His stomach growled.

The tent, overflowing, buzzed with a quiet chatter.

Oh, how he wanted to take his usual place in the back and wait for his cue to throw down the hat, which really was an old Stetson. The old man claimed some rancher left it in one of his first tent meetings. Put it to good use ever since.

But he couldn't go to the back this time.

They came expecting a show, some maybe to hear God's Word preached. Buddy hated to tell them otherwise.

So much for breaking even.

All that work for nothing.

Slipping through the tent's back flap, he jumped up on the small platform—no more than three two-by-four frames with more planks on top. The crowd noise abated then finally died. Every eye in the house looked stuck on him.

Oh Lord, what am I gonna do?

Hesitating only a second, with his heart about to beat right out of his chest, he swallowed hard. “Folks?” His voice cracked. He cleared his throat and spoke louder. “Evening, folks.” He walked to the edge of the well-worn boards.

“Just over two years ago, my mama died birthing my little sister.”

What could he say to make them understand?

Overwhelmed, he wiped a real tear off his cheek. Buddy never asked to be up there in front. “Today.” He swallowed, but it took great effort. “It would've been my parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.”

To swallow kept getting harder. It amazed him that he was telling all those strangers private family business. “My dad . . . he thought he could preach tonight, but—” His lip quivered, and a lump clogged his throat.

Stepping back, he looked out over the tops of people's heads and

hats.

What came next?

A strange, pleasant tingling began in the small of his back then spread up his spine. Before he figured out what the sensation might be, it filled him, encompassed him.

A golden mist fell from the tent's roof like a heavy fog.

Mesmerized him. He'd never seen such a thing.

It covered the congregation, then a peace settled over his heart, slowing its pounding.

One crystal clear note sounded in his head.

A thousand voices in perfect harmony followed. The song danced through his soul until he became one with it. Almost unaware, he tried to hold back the music, wanting to listen longer.

But it bubbled forth. And he sang.

Not one of the tired old hymns his father loved so much.

A new song. One like his mother used to sing.

The mist lifted while he sang, but he couldn't quit. Didn't want to stop. At first, the people only sat and watched, wide-eyed—like a treed ringtail caught in a spotlight. Then a young girl in the back caught the chorus and joined in.

Soon the whole tent erupted with the song.

When that tune finished, another sprang from that secret place the mist had opened.

Oblivious to everything but the melody in his soul, he sang, and the congregation followed. Hours later, must have sung three dozen songs, the floodgate finally closed.

What had happened? He couldn't believe it.

Never in his twelve years had he heard the likes of such music. And it'd come out of his mouth.

Buddy let the last note drift away, not knowing what to say or do next, so . . . he only stared at the people. They stared back.

Amazement etched most faces, but it soon disappeared. A few folks in the back drifted into the night.

One man with a little girl draped over his shoulder, sound asleep, eased forward. When the farmer reached the little platform, he shifted his daughter, fumbled in his pocket, then tossed several bills at Buddy's feet.

Before he knew it, others followed the man's example, and a small pile of greenbacks covered his boots.

When the last person left the tent, the peace left Buddy's soul. Doubt and self-loathing took its place. Somehow, he tricked those folks. Not on purpose. But he definitely hadn't given them what they came for.

All he'd done was sing a few songs. In the morning, when the

town folk realized what happened, they'd want their money back.

Quickly, he crammed the bills into his shirt and ran to the trailer.

"Hey, old man." Buddy shook his father's shoulder. "We gotta get out of here."

"What?" The elder Nightingale opened one eye. "Give me another forty winks. I'm sick, Son."

Buddy tried twice more to rouse him then gave up. He would have to do it by himself.

Methodically, he went about gathering the planks and crates and disassembling the platform, loading it as he went. He packed the Coleman lanterns and arranged the wood along the bottom of the truck like he had done a hundred times before.

Though never by himself.

The urgency to get away increased with each task he completed. Every few minutes, he glanced around expecting to see an angry mob descending on him, demanding their money back.

The sun broke over the eastern horizon just as he untied the first support rope. Using the wooden mallet, he hit the tent peg to the side then yanked on it. Thing wouldn't budge. He whopped it again and pulled with all his might. Nothing.

"Mercy."

Stepping back, he swung full force against the peg.

The mallet struck a glancing blow, slipped out of his hands, and sailed toward the trailer. Slamming into the sheet metal, it missed the window but put a good-sized dent right between it and the door.

Frustration boiled over. He kicked the immovable peg then hopped a circle on one foot. Pain racked his big toe.

What should he do? He had to get out of there.

Tears welled, but he stubbornly wiped them away. Crying sure wouldn't help any. He had to get those blasted pegs up and the tent down before the people came back—be gone before his deceit became known.

"Mercy, boy."

Buddy wheeled around. His father stood in the trailer's door.

"What in Heaven's name are you doing?"

"Please, Dad. Help me get this tent down. We've got to get out of here."

Rumpled and needing a shave, the elder lumbered toward him. "What are you talking about? We just got here. Why would we want to leave so soon?"

Between glances over his shoulder, Buddy explained what had happened the night before. When he finished, he grabbed the tent peg again and pulled. "We've got to hurry. It's daylight, and they'll be here any minute."

The old man grabbed him and pulled him to his chest. "No one's coming after their money, Son." His voice cracked.

Was he going to cry?

"Everything's fine." He cleared his throat. "Sounds like God gave you a gift last night. Confirmed it with this cash. Lord, I wish I could have seen it."

Buddy pulled away.

If only he could believe what the old man said. "Nuh-uh. You're the one with the gift. Even Mama said so. They'll be here any minute, wanting it all back." Did his dad know for sure? "Won't they?"

"Nope. Listen to me, Son. You didn't trick anyone. When folks give their money to the Lord, they never ask for it back."

"You mean all that cash . . . is ours?"

"Sure is. Ain't the Lord good?"

Visions of new shoes and store-bought shirts danced through Buddy's head. All that money, and all he did was sing a few songs.

"Wow, Dad. You think maybe they'll come back tonight? I could sing some more."

"Absolutely." His father wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "I'm sure of it, Son."

Chapter Two

Fall, 1929



he boy jangled his tambourine.

His son jumped down off the platform already in full voice, though only the second song of the evening. Bless his heart, he had them in the palm of his hand. Nathaniel's boy could lead music better than anyone alive.

Sure didn't look or act fifteen. For that matter, had aged considerable after his mother passed away. Nathaniel stood.

Buddy reached halfway down the middle aisle then turned and danced back, his tambourine making its music high over his head. Nathaniel held up his hands. The two hundred-plus souls filling the tent hushed, while Buddy continued to sing.

He stopped then smiled. "Sorry, Dad. Did you want to say something?"

Nodding, Nathaniel motioned for the folks to sit. Like stalks of wheat bending to the wind, the congregation folded themselves in a wave onto the two-by-twelve planks, starting in the front and rolling to the back.

Were all crowds like that, or only church-goers? He put away the idle thought and stepped off the platform.

"Three years ago to this very day, the Lord did something very special." He glanced at his son who stood off to the side of the platform. "God let my boy hear the angels sing then gave him the sweetest voice I've ever heard. Why, I think He's given Buddy more new songs than King David."

“Praise God. Thank you, Jesus!” A woman in the front row shouted and waved one hand toward Heaven. A smattering of amens drifted from the back.

“Amen is right. I tell you, folks, I bless the Lord every day for what He’s done and what He’s doing in our lives.” Nathaniel stepped onto the platform.

“Yes, indeed, the past three years have been wonderful, but the Lord must be taking us in a new direction. As much as we’ve enjoyed these mountains of yours, it’s come time to shut this revival down. Our permit here only allowed two weeks.”

A man in the back jumped to his feet. “I can get you another one, brother. Easy as pie. I work at city hall.”

“Well, I thank you. I truly do, but that just wouldn’t be right. The grounds are already reserved.”

A woman in the front stood. “I’ve got a big ol’ barn no one’s using. We could have meetings there. Look around, Brother Nightingale. I bet there’s not a holiness pastor in a hundred miles any direction. Why, you’d have a built-in congregation.” She faced the back of the tent. “What do you say, neighbors? Want the Nightingales here to start a church in my barn?”

“Wait.” Nathaniel shot his hands palms out toward the congregants. “I would love nothing better than to pastor a church someday. Maybe the Lord will call me to that, but right now, my anointing and calling is as an evangelist. Me pastoring a church would be a work of the flesh.” He shook his head “No, don’t tempt me with this thing. I’m thankful you would want us, but only the Lord can call a man to shepherd His flock.”

He wiped his eyes. Once upon a time, settling down to one church had been his dream, but not now, not without his sweet wife. He swallowed the never-ending pain.

“After the Lord touched Buddy, we decided we’d only go where we were invited, and for the first time in three years, we don’t have an invite anywhere.”

He glanced at his son and held out his arm. The boy joined him as he motioned for the folks to stand.

“While my son here leads us in praise and worship tonight, tune your spirit ears to hear what the Lord might say. We need a word right about now.” He patted Buddy’s shoulder then leaned in. “Send them home when you’re done, Son. I don’t much feel like preaching tonight.”



“Sure, Dad.” The tambourine at Buddy’s side whispered like crystal wind chimes in a gentle breeze. “I don’t know what the Lord has in store. The Reverend Nightingale and I’ve been speculating real hard the last few days.”

A stiffer wind blew over the miniature cymbals.

“But I know God’s in control.” He was shouting now. “And it’s going to be good.”

Amidst a chorus of amens, a sea of up-turned palms filled the air. Buddy banged the instrument over his head in a syncopated beat. He loved church, loved singing and praising the Lord. Nothing he knew came close.

“Bless the Lord, people.” He popped the tambourine against the heel of his palm in rhythm. “Put your hands together and give Him glory for He is a worthy God.” Buddy leapt onto the platform.

A melody burst from his heart, and he sang. The congregation clapped and listened until he repeated the chorus the second time then joined in.

The song flowed, and by the third run through, the folks had made it their own. Though in the Spirit, Buddy worshipped at the very throne of God, the pop of canvas against canvas made its way to his fleshly ears, and he knew his father had slipped out.

It drew him back. Something in Buddy wanted to run after him. But he remembered the people and put his concern away instead.

The reverend had gotten through the last two anniversaries without a drink. He’d be fine. With three years to the day since his last slip-up, he wouldn’t turn back now. Buddy was sure of it.

He let the song drift off then started another one. Last nights always proved special, and he refused to ruin this one worrying about his father. After all, no need.

Worry didn’t do anything but hinder every promise of his Heavenly Father. Nope. Faith filled him, not fear. He refused to insult God by doubting.

And special it was indeed.

Buddy’s song-well didn’t run dry until a ways past midnight. The kids were long asleep, but not a man-jack or his sister had left the tent. He hated to stop, but knew better than to continue without the flow; never want to force things.

The Word spoke of a time for everything under Heaven, and he’d learned in the last three years when time to close the service came.

“Bless the Lord, folks. Isn’t He good?”

They nodded almost in unison. Hallelujahs and snippets of praise filled the tent.

“It’s late, brothers and sisters. Does someone have a prayer to send us on our way?” Someone would. They always did. Holiness folks

loved to pray.

Before he was really ready, the tent emptied. He slapped his forehead. He'd forgotten to throw down the hat. Oh, well, wasn't like he and his dad needed the money. They had more stashed away than he ever dreamed.

The Lord had been so good.

He turned off the Coleman lanterns, tied off the flaps then headed north. Pale streaks of moonlight filtered through the trees around the empty parking lot, casting ominous shadows. A chill danced down Buddy's back.

At first, he just walked a little faster, then before he knew it, he ran, not knowing exactly why, but propelled by a need to find the reverend.

Their permit didn't allow on-site camping, so they had rented space for the truck and trailer about three-quarters of a mile up the steep, winding mountain road.

As the main house came into view, Buddy stretched out his legs and sprinted. He slowed with the first step on the drive's loose gravel, but continued trotting until past the row of cabins that guarded the campgrounds.

The truck came into view, and he slowed again. The light on in the trailer increased the foreboding. He jerked the door open, half-expecting to see the old man dead drunk. The little kitchen sat quiet and empty. He tiptoed down the hall and peeked into the back. The vacant bed hadn't been slept in. "Dad? You here?"

Only silence answered. He checked every nook and cranny, but no old man, drunk or sober. Where could he have gone? Buddy wandered back to the kitchen. A Big Chief tablet on the table caught his eye. He picked the thing up and held it under the light.

'Son,' the note began, 'I can't stand it anymore. Hurts too bad. You do whatever the Lord tells you. I'm sorry. '

Buddy reread then studied each word. It couldn't be. He might get drunk, but he'd never take his own life. Not the reverend. He might tie on a good one and have himself a good cry, but he'd come on back. That's what he'd do.

"Oh Lord, don't let him hurt himself. Please, God, I need him."

For all his confidence, Buddy couldn't shake the doubt. He loved his father and couldn't stand the thought of losing him. He really didn't expect him back that night, but feared going to bed and waking to some lawman bearing bad news.

So he pulled a table chair outside and sat under the big oak in front of the trailer.

The hours dragged by while he sat outside and watched, seeing the old evangelist out of the corner of his eye, then it being nothing

but a shadow against a tree more times than he could count.

A few minutes past false dawn, the sound of footsteps turned his head. A shadowy form stepped into a clearing.

Buddy's heart sank. Only the lady who owned the campgrounds; a nice-looking woman, but she wasn't the old man. "Morning, Miss Ruby."

"Oh. Buddy. I didn't see you sitting there. You sure are up early."

He smiled. "Actually, haven't been to bed."

"I see. And what's kept you up all night?"

He shook his head. "I'd rather not say. It's personal." He didn't know for sure the old man took off on a binge, and he sure didn't want to start any gossip. Love covered. That's what the Good Book said.

"Well, if there's something I can do, let me know." She pulled her wrap tighter. "A little chilly this morning."

"Sure is." He stood and stepped toward her. "You know, there is something. Would you be aware of anyone who might want to work a few hours?"

"Maybe. What kind of work you have in mind?"

"I need to have our tent down by sundown. If you could help me find a couple of hard workers, it won't take more than three hours, but I'll pay a day's wage."

She laughed. "That sounds fair enough. When do you want to get started?"

"Sooner the better."

By one that afternoon, Buddy headed back to the campgrounds with the tent folded and packed into the truck in a third of the time it would have taken him and the old man. He down-shifted then slowed as he reached the big house.

Miss Ruby stood on the porch and waved as he eased by. He'd noticed her good looks before, but today she seemed different.

A lurid image flashed across his mind's eye. He forced it away, backed the truck up to the trailer then jumped out and check his position; still a foot short and six inches too far to the right.

Three tries later, he wasn't any closer to getting the two-inch ball under the trailer's tongue. His dad mastered the chore so well Buddy never even had to try before.

"Need a spotter?"

Sticking his head out the window, he smiled. Miss Ruby stood off to the side of the trailer. "Sure could use one. The old man usually does the backing."

"I see." She wiggled one finger. "Ease on back." She held out her palm then wormed again pointing to the left. Praise God. He stabbed the thing the first try. She watched while he screwed the keeper tight.

“You heading out?”

He snapped on the last safety chain and stood. “I guess so.”

“Not going to wait for your dad?”

“I figured I’d try to find him.”

“That might be a little hard if you’re planning on taking the truck.”

He studied her a second. Something about the woman . . . Buddy couldn’t put his finger on it. She made him uncomfortable—in a nice sort of way though. “You know where he is?”

“No, not exactly, but he headed out that way.” She pointed behind the trailer. “I watched him from my back porch until he topped that ridge.”

Buddy stepped next to her. The place she indicated might only be a mile away as the crow flew, but probably four or five times that far, considering the ups and downs.

The woods covering the mountains grew so thick, you couldn’t see more than a couple of feet into them.

“He walked into that?”

She nodded. “I think you should wait here, Buddy. If he’s not back in a few days, we’ll call the sheriff.”

He shrugged. “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course, I am.” She wrapped her arm around his shoulder then kissed him on the temple. “You can stay with me in the big house until he comes back. We’ll keep each other company.”

Buddy started to protest, but sleeping in a real bed and eating a woman’s cooking sounded great. “I’d like that, Miss Ruby.”

“Good.” She squeezed his shoulder a little harder. “And Buddy, drop the Miss. You’re old enough to call me by my given name.”

He smiled. “Whatever you say, Ruby.”

Chapter Three



N

athaniel awoke gagging.

Acidic bile flew from his nose. He retched and spewed until his stomach turned inside out, then swallowed and spit until he could bear the taste. He needed a drink.

Where was he?

The maple, pine, and heavy underbrush jarred his memory. Humph, somewhere around the middle of the Ouachita forest, at least its southwest corner.

His stomach flipped again and more bile erupted, but he kept it out of his nose—barely. He hated his worthless self, hated his weakness.

“Oh God, why do I miss her so much?” An old fear came to his lips. “That’s why You took her, isn’t it? On account of You thought I loved her more than You.”

No answer came, but he didn’t need one. Truth was truth. He’d loved her too much. Oh, he would always love the Lord, but why had He taken Evelyn?

His backpack lay next to the circle of stones he’d so lovingly arranged, just like when he’d first taken her camping. How she loved sleeping under the stars. He crawled toward it. Three fifths and six pints waited, or was it five?

What day was it?

How long had he been there? He tried to remember, but couldn’t. Didn’t matter. There he’d be so long as Jack Daniels remained.



Just five miles east, an evil wind blowing across Buddy's soul jerked him awake. He jumped out of bed as if he'd been doused with a dipper full of spring water, and searched the sunlit room.

Nothing amiss.

A gentle breeze rustled the curtains next to his bed. His father came to mind, but that couldn't be it.

The Lord's peace about the old man settled over him before he'd gone to sleep, and it still held. God would bring the reverend back in His own time when they were both ready. Though the evil passed, a foreboding of biblical proportions clung to him.

The door cracked open. "Morning, sleepyhead." Ruby stuck her head in. "Glad you're awake. Want some breakfast?"

"Yes, ma'am." He grabbed his shirt "Anything I can do?"

"Just wash your hands. Everything's ready."

While Buddy ate Ruby's bacon and eggs, conversation ceased. He nodded in agreement when she inquired about the gravy, then she fell silent herself. By his second cup of coffee, the foreboding fermented into a knowing. He wiped his mouth.

"What day of the month is it?"

"The twenty-ninth. Why?"

"Mark it down. Something bad's going to happen today."

She smiled. "You don't know that."

He didn't answer. Arguing wouldn't help, but he knew something awful lurked on the horizon. Something big. "So, what does a room in the big house go for?"

"I only rent cabins and campsites."

"A cabin then. I've got money. I can pay."

She patted his hand. "I invited you to stay. You're my guest, and I won't hear another word about it."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you. Sure is gracious of you."

"Good heavens, you are so polite." She winked. "And so handsome."

The smile along with the twinkle in Ruby's eye made Buddy's cheeks tingle. He liked the woman making over him, liked the feel of her hand on his, and loved her cooking.

"Thank you, Ruby. My mother, God rest her soul, deserves most of the credit. She was a real stickler for manners. After a while, they get to be habit."

"Do you think that's what's eating your dad? I mean . . . your mother's death?"

"Don't think it, I know it. Saturday last would have been their twenty-eighth wedding anniversary."

"How long has she been dead—if you don't mind me asking?"

“Been gone five years now, but she’s not dead. She’s still alive, just living with the Lord. For a fact, she’s in Heaven, but it’s still hard to talk about. Miss her something fierce.”

Scooting her chair over, Ruby wrapped her arm around his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

All thoughts of his mother vanished as Ruby hugged him. So soft, and she smelled so good, like honeysuckle on a spring morning. He stood.

The twinkle turned to concern. “What’s the matter, Bud?”

He backed to the counter next to the sink. How could he answer? He’d never been alone with a grown woman who wasn’t a blood relative.

“Nothing.” His cheeks burned, but he couldn’t take his eyes off her. He wanted her to hug him again, but at the same time wanted to be anywhere else. “Everything.”

She stood and grabbed their dirty plates. “Well, it’s been over thirty-six hours since your father took off. Think maybe we should make that call?” She brushed his arm as she returned to the table for the leftovers.

He tried not to notice the electric charge that spread from the spot where her skin touched his. “No, ma’am. He’ll be back when he’s ready.”

“You sure? He might need some help.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m sure. When Mama died, he stayed drunk for better than a year. Anniversaries are always worst.”

The words barely left his mouth before conviction hit him for telling the stranger about his dad’s weakness. Holiness preachers . . . well, everyone expected them to be perfect.

“Why didn’t someone stop him?”

The warmth waned. He wanted more, but pushed the thought away. Though at least twice his age, maybe more, she’d felt so soft and looked good.

“Several tried. He’d sober up a day or two. Once, he even made it two weeks.” He laughed. “Of all things, a Jack Daniels delivery truck broke down just up the road from my grandma’s house.”

The mirth died, and he shook his head. “I thought he was going to kill himself for sure that time. The truck driver sold it for whatever he could get, and this guy Dad drank with sometimes bought two cases for a dollar.”

A hum glided by his ear. He slapped the air. If only he could swat away the memory. Was it a mosquito?

“Anyway, this guy, Jake or Jack or whatever his name was, caught Dad at a weak moment. Ended up locking themselves in his cellar and emptying both cases.” Buddy stopped himself. He shouldn’t

be telling her those things.

She untied her apron and laid it over a chair. "Why don't we have another cup of coffee on the back porch?"

Accepting the steaming cup she offered, he followed her out. The scent of pine hung thick in the cool morning air. The hills below looked like the Lord had spread a beautiful patchwork quilt of yellow, red, purple and gold over the earth.

The house sat on top of the mountain, the porch suspended out over a steep drop-off.

Leaning on the rail, he gazed down. A heavy undergrowth and the tops of trees growing farther down obstructed sight of any ground below, but straight out, a person could see forever—to the far mountaintop and beyond.

To say beautiful didn't describe it enough. It took his breath. "Mercy. What a view."

"Yes, it is. I fell in love with this porch the first day I came." She sat in a high-backed wicker rocker, so feminine and graceful.

"I can sure see why." Still leaning against the rail, he studied her while he sipped his coffee. "When was that anyway? How long have you been here?"

Maybe she'd give away her age. He didn't know much about women, but enough not to ask. His guess would be somewhere between twenty-four and thirty-five.

"Nineteen-o-nine. I've lived here just over twenty years."

"Was the porch the reason you decided to buy the place?"

She laughed. "I didn't decide anything. I married the man who built it. Frank brought me to Arkansas, to this very house, right after the wedding. Been here ever since."

"How'd you meet him?"

She laughed again, a melodious happy sound he could listen to all day. "I didn't. He knew my father. You could say I was a little like a mail-order bride."

"Really? Why'd you ever agree to marry a man you didn't know? I mean, you could have had about anybody, I'd guess."

"Aww, that's sweet." She rocked back and looked off. "A lot of reasons I suppose, for sure more than one." She faced him. "Ever been on a hog farm?"

"Not really. Driven by them enough to know they stink."

"Well, my dad raised hogs. No one came around except other hog farmers, and I for sure wasn't about to marry anyone who had anything to do with those smelly beasts." She smiled. "I hated them."

Her eyes were outstanding, so big and expressive.

"Back then, this place was a hunting lodge, and the road nothing but a trail. I loved it here from the first day. Frank proved to be a

good man, and we had a good marriage. It just didn't last long enough."

His question answered, she just stopped. The comfortable silence gave the floor to the cricket's song. She refrained from being chatty like so many women he'd been around. Some of those ladies would talk your arm off, but Ruby . . . If she had something to say, she'd say it then hush; except he didn't want her to.

"So what happened to your husband?"

"Died in his sleep almost two years ago. Guess I wore him out." Her eyes smiled, but her lips pouted. "I can empathize with you and your dad missing your mama. My Frank . . . he was like my knight in shining armor.

"I don't know if I'll ever get used to him being gone. But it wasn't like I didn't know it might happen. I mean, with thirty-nine years difference in our ages."

Biting his bottom lip, he hoped his cheeks weren't too red. He'd never been around a woman like Ruby, so open about things.

Church folks acted like certain pleasures didn't exist. Maybe she meant something else. He turned away and thankfully spotted the ridge she'd pointed out Saturday night.

"So that's where you last saw my dad?"

She joined him. With her arm lying across his back, her hand draping over his shoulder, she gently pulled him down, turned his cheek with her cheek and pointed.

"See that big boulder there? He stopped a minute and rested against it then disappeared down the backside. That's the last I saw of him."

Concentrating came hard. Her breath, so sweet and warm. He tried to change the subject, but it backfired on him. "Uh, what's on the other side?"

She moved her cheek, but left her hand on his shoulder "More of the same. Fort Smith's about eighty miles as the crow flies."

He backed away, had to get free from her. Reminded him of the Proverbs, but Ruby wasn't like that. Still . . . "I think I'll go see if I can find him."

"And what are you going to do if you do?"

"Nothing, just make sure he's all right."

Ruby nodded. "Come with me." She led him to the side porch and flipped her hand at three shelves of gear. "There's everything you might need. Help yourself." She patted his shoulder. "Supper's at six. I'll be real worried if you're late."



The boy laughed, a man's chuckle. "I'll be back way before then. Wouldn't miss your cooking for nothing."

Ruby returned to the back porch and watched until Bud reached the same spot his father had two days before. He waved then disappeared. She hated what she was thinking, but if he came back alone, she might not be able to help herself.

Poor kid. Except he was more man than anyone she'd been around since Frank died. And Bud had a good heart.

Soon enough, she headed to the kitchen. Maybe she would make a quick trip to the store. Dinner should be especially good. He said he'd be back way before six.

Chapter Four



uddy spotted a broken branch and relaxed a bit.

With nary a sign before, he'd been wondering if he'd taken a wrong turn. The ground turned rocky half an hour ago, and he'd lost the old man's tracks. Following what looked to be the path of least resistance, he advanced twenty paces into the thicket.

His father's voice stopped him. He crept closer and peeked around a tree.

In the midst of a little clearing, the great Nathaniel Nightingale stood with a pint of Jack Daniel's in one hand and the other reaching toward heaven. "Why, Father?"

He shouted the question repeatedly. Finally, the old man's voice, raspy and strained, faded to a whisper. He lowered his hand. Still watching the sky, he raised the bottle to his lips and swilled a third of the amber liquid.

"Did I love her more than you, Lord? Maybe I did. I don't know. But You gave her to me. And I loved her so long. How could You take her? Too soon. You took her too soon."

Tears rolled down Buddy's cheeks. He loved his dad so much, but he couldn't help him, and he sure couldn't stand to watch the mighty pain his father suffered. He and the Lord had to work it out.

Turning away, he headed for Ruby's, wiping his tears with his sleeve. God wouldn't let anything bad happen to the old man. He was sure of that.

The woods enveloped him with their stillness, accepted his presence. Leaves rained down, padding the ground with all the autumn colors he'd enjoyed from the porch. He cleared the thicket and pointed his face to the big house.

Images of Ruby, busying herself cooking for him, lifted his spirit.

Hadn't eaten so well since his grandmother's house. Every now and then, someone would invite him and the old man to share a home-cooked meal, but mostly, he ate sandwiches or out of cans.

Food aside, he loved living on the road, loved getting to see so much of the country. But he could get real used to being around Ruby. He liked everything about her, from the way she looked to the sound of her voice.

His pace quickened, sure didn't want to be late for supper.

Retracing his steps, he made it back to the trailer with enough time to wash up. After three changes, he decided on his black suit-pants and pink shirt. She might like it best. Women always complimented him on it.

He knocked on her front door a little before six. Wouldn't want to cause her any worry.

Since he'd cleared that big rock, he kept an eye on her back porch, hoping to catch sight of her. Funny how much he wanted to see her face again.

The door opened, and Ruby stepped out. "Well, don't you look nice?"

She wrapped her arm around his shoulder and guided him into the house. Good thing he'd hit his growth spurt the summer before. He liked being a little taller than her, at least an inch or two.

"Thank you. So do you."

What a dumb thing to say. He made himself not focus on her pressing against his forearm.

As he walked lock step with her toward the kitchen, the aroma of roasting meat with a hint of baking bread activated his saliva glands. His mouth watered something fierce.

That and the tingling radiating from his arm melded into a new kind of bliss.

The table looked so inviting and pretty like his mother's used to. Ruby laid her head onto his shoulder, squeezed then released him.

"It sure is nice having a man to cook for again."

Man? It suddenly seemed too hot. She pulled out a chair, and held it for him.

"Oh no, ma'am." He rushed over and pulled her chair out.

"How sweet you are, but I still need to get the rolls out of the oven, dear. You go ahead and sit down."

His face burned. What was he thinking?

"Did you find your dad?"

Nodding, he eased down. "Yes, ma'am."

"What did he have to say?"

Buddy shook his head ever so slightly, then bit his lip just enough

to hold back the tears.

She retreated to the stove, busied herself a minute, then set a basket of the wonderful-smelling rolls next to him and took the chair he'd left pulled out.

"Hey, listen. I can understand you not wanting to talk about him." She patted his hand. "But I'm not one to gossip, Bud, so don't worry yourself about that."

He found his voice midway through the meal. He'd wanted to tell her before, but wasn't sure he could without crying. The pot roast with all the trimmings dulled the remembrance though.

"I found him over the second ridge from the boulder. Hollering at God like the Lord was deaf." He speared a chunk of potato. "'Course, he had a pint he was nursing pretty hard between his bellowing, but he could still stand up. I've seen him worse."

"Do you think we should do something? Take him some food or —" She waved her hand toward the ceiling. "There's a tent in the attic. We could get that down."

"No, ma'am. He's got to work this out by himself. Him and God. I'll check on him in a day or two if he isn't back."

"I guess you know best."

The tone in her voice didn't match her words. He liked that she seemed concerned about his dad's well-being. Would've been disappointed if she wasn't, but at least, her unease hadn't caused her to go against him. In that case, he did know best.

No way would he make it any easier on the old man.

He smiled. "So, how was your day?" He dug back into his meal.

"I had a real good one." She winked. "Got a surprise for you while I was in town."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"And why not? I love to sew. Come on, I'll show you."

He stabbed the last bit of roast on his plate then followed after her. She backed down the hall, grinning like a kid with a new puppy. He caught up with her just as she reached her bedroom. Ruby held out her hands. "Wait here."

Buddy strained his neck, but couldn't see her.

"All right, close your eyes and come on in."

Grabbing the door jamb, he squinted his eyes shut and walked in.

"Two more steps, then turn to the right."

Following her instructions, he waved the air in front of him as he went.

She pressed against his back. Oh wow! He swallowed.

Something swept past him. He peeked. She'd positioned him in front of a free-standing, full-length mirror and held a new shirt up to his chest.

“Do you like it?”

He leaned back into her. “Oh, yes, ma’am. I like it a lot.”

Laughing, she flipped the shirt over his head. “You make me feel old, calling me ma’am all the time.”

He wheeled and grabbed it, grinning. No one besides his grandmother had ever sewn him new clothes before. “Sure don’t mean to do that.” He held out the sky blue shirt. “I love it.”

“Try it on. I want to see how it looks on you.” That smile of hers chased away everything but happy. “Do you really like it?”

His hands trembled as he fumbled with the buttons on his pink shirt. “I sure do. Hadn’t had a nice shirt like this since Mama died.”

Ruby put her hands over his and gently pried them away. “Here. Let me do that for you.”

The trembling spread to his knees. He grabbed one of her shoulders. She unbuttoned the last one, then eased his arms out and let his pink shirt drop to the floor. The trembling eased. He stepped back and put on the new one.

“It’s Egyptian cotton. I hope it fits.”

He popped the tail down and spread his arms. “Like a glove.” The material was crisp yet smooth. “So it came all the way from Egypt?”

If it was Egyptian, idiot, where else would it have come from. Mercy, why did he keep saying such stupid things? His cheeks warmed again.

But she just smiled then held her arms out open wide. “Oh, good, it is a good fit.”

In a heartbeat, every scripture on fornication and adultery he’d ever heard about or read raced through his mind. He ignored every one and walked into her embrace. She swept her hands over his chest then pushed the shirt down and off his arms.

He kissed her on the lips. “I love you, Ruby.”

“I know you do.” She unbuckled his belt.

Reality blurred into searing pleasure then cooled to a slow burn, only to ignite again to a new fevered pitch. Finally sated, he twirled her hair as she cuddled into his shoulder. He didn’t know what to do, but he’d never live another day without her.

She snuggled in closer then kissed his chest. “Good night, Bud.”

One thing bothered him, and he would correct that in the morning. Other than that and her age, she was perfect. And he didn’t care about her being older. Didn’t matter a twit. He wanted her.

Just like King David wanted Bathsheba, he wanted Ruby. And his lady was available, no husbands to kill.

The old man would either like it or have to get used to it because he intended to marry the woman. The Bible said when a man lies with a woman, then they were married. He’d never even kissed a girl

before, but now . . .

He had to have Ruby, have her to be his forever. He loved her same as his dad loved Mama.

As the second watch disappeared into the third, his resolve slipped into the best dream ever. He and Ruby had their own trailer and truck, following the reverend in the old one.

Like a kaleidoscope, his dream twisted and turned from one wonderful scene to another. The vision slowed then stopped at her kitchen.

The table, heavy laden with every kind of breakfast food he liked, astounded him. The bacon's salty smell made him grab a piece and crunch it. Pain shot from his mouth, and he snapped awake.

"Mercy." He tasted blood.

Before Buddy could gather himself enough to get out of bed, Ruby dashed into the room. "What happened?"

He shrugged. "Guess I must've bit the blood out of my tongue." He sniffed. "And it's all your fault."

"Is that right?" She laughed. "How can you blame me?"

He swung his feet over the side. "Dreaming about one of your breakfasts; and the smell of the bacon; had to take me a bite."

She tried to frown, but only managed looking silly, then tossed him his pants. "You can quit your dreaming. Real thing's on the table just a'waitin'."

Before he sopped the last of the gravy, Buddy decided he'd wait to discuss marriage.

Twice, while she washed and he dried the dishes, he almost changed his mind and blurted out a proposal, but words that seemed right in his mind hung unspoken on his lips.

"So, what do you want to do now?" Ruby dried her hands on his dish rag.

"How about coffee on the back porch?"

Kissing his cheek, she winked. "Only one though. You look like you need a nap."

"I think you're right. You're looking pretty exhausted yourself after all that cooking."

The next two days flew by in a blur. Buddy spent more time in bed than out. Other than one traveling salesman who came in late and left early every day, the place remained deserted. He loved having her all to himself and didn't want the time to ever end.

If the old man stayed out much longer though, he'd be too weak to walk out.

Friday morning on the back porch, Buddy decided over coffee. "It's been six days. Guess I'd better go get Dad."

"That'll give me a chance to go to town." She snapped her fingers.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. That salesman who’s been here all week checked out this morning. He told me the stock market crashed last Tuesday. Said people have been jumping out of windows on Wall Street over lost fortunes. The papers are making a big deal out of it. They’re calling it Black Tuesday.”

A chill danced up Buddy’s back. “Remember? I told you something bad was going to happen that morning.”



Ruby stared at him for a second then nodded. “You sure did. I’d forgotten.” She tilted her head slightly. “How did you know?”

“The reverend says I get words of knowledge.” He wiped his hand over his face. “I don’t know if that’s exactly it. It’s not words that God speaks in my ear. I just know things, and they always come true. It started about two weeks after I heard the angels sing.”

Ruby didn’t know what to say. She’d never had too much to do with church people, but sure enough Bud had said something bad was going to happen before it did. “What about the angels singing? You heard them?”

Leaning his head back, the boy stared off a second then bore into her with those eyes. Her heart fluttered. He smiled then leaned closer.

“Seems like that was a lifetime ago. So much has happened. Actually, it’s only been three years, and yes, ma’am—oops, sorry.”

Dear Bud, so thoughtful and too polite for his own britches. He launched into his story as though he’d never told anyone else. The more he talked, the more convinced she became that he’d actually heard angels sing.

Tears filled her eyes. She wished she could have been there to see it all then help the poor kid load the tent.

“Before, I’d never tried to sing or even thought about it much. Then all of a sudden, I was leading the music.”

“What a story.”

“Same with knowing things.” He shrugged. “We were in Hico, Texas—that’s a little town up the road from Marble Falls—anyway, that’s when the first knowing came. There was this little girl who had never walked. Her parents brought her in a Radio Flyer wagon. Polio crippled her.”

“Poor little thing.”

“I told her all she had to do was get up, and the Lord would straighten her legs.”

What? Ruby waited, but he didn’t say anything. She loved the way he didn’t brag. “Did the little girl stand up?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am.” He smiled. “She was dancing before the night was over; so was everyone else in the tent. A bunch of folks got right that night.”

She stood and held out her arms. He rose and stepped into her embrace. What a very special young man her Bud proved to be. She squeezed. His chest swelled, and she wrapped her arms tighter around. “Oh, I wish—” She bit her lip.

He leaned back. “What? What do you wish?”

“Oh, nothing. You better go find your dad.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

She kissed him then shoved him toward the door. “Bring him back here. I’ll help you or stay out of your way, but I’d rather him be here than in that little trailer.”

He didn’t answer, just nodded then disappeared into the house. She didn’t even think about her wish until he waved from the big rock. The sweet mixed with the bitter, and she cried.

“Oh, Bud. My dear Bud, I wish you were older.”

Chapter Five



hen Buddy reached about halfway down the first hollow from the big rock, the wind swirled, held its breath, then blew steady out of the north.

It seemed like the temperature dropped fifteen degrees. In the morning sunshine, he hadn't thought he would need a coat and only grabbed his corduroy jacket, more for the thickness than warmth.

His pace quickened as a wall of black rolled in overhead. He buttoned his jacket. A fine mist wet his cheeks. So much for the Indian summer. He found his father curled in a ball next to the circle of stones. "Wake up, Dad. A storm's coming."

"Let me sleep, Son. I'm sick."

Buddy shook him. He had lost some weight. "Come on, old man. I came to help you get back. You'll freeze out here."

"Leave me."

"No. I won't. Now get up." He pulled his father to his feet.

"Oh, Buddy, just leave me here. I don't deserve to live."

"If God thought that, I figure you'd be dead, so put your weight on me and come on. It's getting colder by the minute."

His father moaned, but didn't protest further. The man was so weak, it took Buddy three times as long to make his way back to Ruby's. His dad didn't even ask why they were there. He slurped a little soup then let Buddy lead him to bed.

The reverend didn't say a word. Didn't have to. The pain in his eyes said it all.

If only Buddy could make it go away, but at least, he understood it a little better now that he had Ruby. Soon, raspy snores chased him from the extra bedroom. He found her in the kitchen. "How was your day?" He kissed her cheek.

“Good, missed you. Want some soup?”

“Please.” He took the far chair—his place. He liked the way it fit and had the best view of her cooking. He loved watching her, loved her fluid grace. The way she moved, the sway of her hips, the way her hair would flip and then float back to her shoulders.

She set a bowl in front of him then sat at the crude, homemade table worn smooth by the years. “Be careful, it’s hot.”

He slurped a spoonful. “It’s delicious.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled. He could look the world over and never find another woman to match Ruby.

“The Bible says a guy finds a good thing when he finds a wife. Says when he finds a pearl of great price, he should sell all that he owns and buy it.” He patted her hand. “Well, I’ve found my own precious stone—a ruby instead of a pearl, but you’re the best good-thing I’ve ever found. And I’ll give everything I have if you’ll be mine, Ruby. Will you marry me?”

“Oh, Bud, you are so sweet. But, darlin’, my answer has to be no.” She covered his hand with hers. “I can’t. It’s just not right.”

“Why? I love you, and we’re already married according to the Bible. Soon as the reverend’s better, he can make it official.” He couldn’t believe she was saying no. She loved him, she had to. She could never deny the bond.

“I’d love nothing better, but it would never work. I’m old enough to be your mother.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter. How old could you be?” He wiped his mouth. “What twenty-eight? That’s only thirteen years. That’s nothing.”

“You know just the right thing to say.” She shook her head. Her eyes pooled. “Oh, Bud. I’m so sorry. I’m such a fool. Please understand. I never should have done what I did. It was wrong.” She glanced toward the back of the house.

“Your father will never agree. I admit, sweetheart, our relationship . . . surely wonderful while it lasted.” She brushed a tear from her cheek. “But it’s got to be over.”

Her words stabbed his heart like a cruel dagger. “No, Ruby. I can’t live without you now. I won’t. I love you.”

“I know you do, my sweet boy.”

“I’m not a boy! I’m a man.”

She held out her arms. “Oh, why couldn’t you have been older?”

He stepped into her embrace. “I’ve been old a long time.” He kissed her long and soft. “You’re mine, Ruby. God gave you to me.”

She leaned back and stared into his eyes. Her mouth moved, but no words came out. Her eyes softened, and desire oozed from the

windows of her soul. Buddy smiled then kissed her again. She resisted for half a heartbeat then pressed herself to him.

"I've been old too long myself." She kissed him.

Much later that night, in the nether land between sleep and wake, Buddy realized she had said one true thing that evening. Once the reverend sobered up and got right, he would never agree to marry them. He cuddled to the length of her, loved touching skin to skin.

Images of standing beside Ruby before a judge eased him into sweet dreams.

From a sound sleep, Buddy jerked awake, squinting. His father stood in the doorway holding a candle.

The disappointment in his eyes broke Buddy's heart. He wanted to explain, say something, anything, but all he could do was stare back. The reverend looked so old. He shook his head then turned his back.

Buddy jumped out of bed and threw on his pants. The front door opened as he found his shirt. He dashed down the hall. "Dad, wait up."

The reverend stopped halfway out the door and faced him. "For what? I'm leaving."

"You can't, not now. You're in no condition to go anywhere."

"I'm for sure not staying in some harlot's house."

Buddy gritted his teeth. "Ruby's not a whore. We love each other."

The old man rubbed his forehead then wiped his face. "Son, I'm sorry, but you don't love that woman."

"You don't know that. How could you even begin to know what's in my heart?"

"I know. Trust me. You don't love her."

The power of his father's words pulled Buddy back. The old man might have a few faults, but he wasn't a liar, and if he said a thing was so, way more than not, it was so. "How can you say that?"

"Sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons up to four generations." He stepped inside and closed the door, but the cold wind continued blowing over Buddy's heart.

"But Dad."

"You're so much like my father, Son. Charley Nightingale was a rounder and a drunk. The whoring skipped me 'cause I met your mother, but I've seen that part of him in you from the start. I've feared it, and now it's come true."

Grandma Nightingale had never talked about her husband, and Buddy learned not to pry early on. Oh, he knew what the man looked like from a photograph on the mantle, and a pair of his silver spurs sat next to his picture, so he figured he was a horseman.

That's about all he knew of his grandfather, but his dad couldn't be right.

He shook his head. "That doesn't mean anything. I'm me, not him."

"But you're just like him, Buddy. You don't love that woman. You love all women. That's what he told me once. Told me he loved my mother, but couldn't help himself. He loved all women, and they loved him."

"He's right, Bud."

Buddy wheeled around. Ruby stood in the middle of the room. He wished he'd gotten around to telling her not to call him Bud. He rushed toward her.

"He can't be right. You may not admit it, but we do love each other."

"No, sweetheart, we really don't. We needed each other, and I know I let it go too far, but it isn't love."

He stopped dead in his tracks. She let it go too far? It wasn't love? He wanted to grab those words and stuff them back into her mouth. He couldn't live without her. "You're lying. You love me." He wouldn't cry. "I know you do."

"Did I ever say it? Did you ever hear me say I loved you?"

"No, but . . . but actions speak louder than words. I saw it in your eyes." He took another step toward her. "I felt it in your touch."

She didn't say anything, only shook her head ever so slightly.

Tears filled his eyes. "Tell me."

"What? Tell you that I wanted you? That I've been so lonely I convinced myself a boy was a man? What do you want to hear? You're a great lover? I could say all that, but no, Bud. I'm sorry. I don't love you."

Her tone hurt worse than her words.

He stared at the floor.

His father joined him and wrapped his arm over Buddy's shoulders. He took one last look into Ruby's eyes then turned his back. Maybe the old man was right. Maybe he didn't really love her.

"Come on, old man. It's time we hit the road."

Chapter Six



Spring, 1939



e was there!

Right there, right then in Burnett County! Sandy could hardly believe Buddy Nightingale had pulled in sometime that morning only eight miles away in Pine Bluff.

Unable to believe she'd slept through his service when she was only four, she reread the piece of paper for the hundredth time.

Her school bus turned off Highway 71 onto the gravel road home to Cypress Springs. She had to see this fellow Papa had talked so much about—him and about everyone else in the community since the last time the guy came to Marble Falls thirteen years ago.

The rolling hills, dotted with live oaks, cedars, and prickly pear cactus passed by the school bus window with little notice. Her mind's eye picture of Buddy Nightingale captivated every conscious thought.

What was he doing right then while she bounced along the dusty road? She first imagined him practicing his songs, getting ready for the evening service.

Then, that he pounded away at the tent stakes. Sweaty and hot, he tossed aside his shirt then continued bare-chested. Oh, how she wished she could be there to see it.

Last spring when the Nightingales pitched their tent in Hico, no one would drive her the eighty miles. To make matters worse, a month later, her cousin wrote, going on and on about his gorgeousness and how beautiful he sang.

So unfair!

Her whole life, Sandy heard stories about the preacher's kid who

could sing like his namesake. His thick wavy hair and deep blue eyes dominated every conversation with any girl lucky enough to have attended a Nightingale revival.

For the last five years, since she turned thirteen, Sandy prayed they would come close enough that she could see Buddy for herself. Now, finally, God answered her prayers.

And if she had to sneak out and walk the eight miles, she intended to go.

Finally, the old bus rounded their corner. Sandy swung around the metal guard pole, skipped the top step, and landed on the last. When it screeched to a stop, she stood at the bottom, with her nose almost touching the door.

The driver grunted and yanked on the lever. She bolted, running through the bus' dust cloud that continued drifting forward.

As she hurried down the lane lined on either side by stately oaks, she scanned the two home pastures. No sign of Papa. She slowed to a walk. The tractor rested in its shed. The barn!

That's where he must be. She raced to the red two-story structure. Once inside, she paused, letting her eyes adjust.

The faint musk of last year's hay mixed with the strong ammonia stench . . . nasty! And only one of the reasons she always helped Mama in the house, and left Emma Lee to help Papa in the barn and in the fields.

Movement caught Sandy's eye. A hulking figure in greasy overalls strode around the '34 Ford.

Now that everyone said the Depression neared its end, her Papa went and spent some of his hard cash on a used car, the family's first new vehicle in ten years. Em called him cheap to his face, but Sandy admired her father's frugality.

"Papa! Guess what." The yell sounded a little louder than she intended, unable to keep her news any longer.

Eying her, his stern expression softened. "Well, let's see. Your birthday's just past, and won't be another till next year. So—" He scratched his whiskered chin. "Guess that leaves them holy rollers."

She smiled. "But not just any holy rollers, Papa. The Nightingales are at the Pine Bluff campgrounds." She swallowed hard, fearful of his answer before she asked. "Can we go tonight? Will you take me?"

He wiped the grease off his hands. "You sure it's really them?"

"Positive. I've got one of their flyers." She dug into her pocket for the worn, crumpled paper and held it out. "Kids are passing them out all over Marble Falls. I've always loved your stories about them, Papa. Please? Will you take me to see them finally?"

He glanced at the bill. "Well." He squinted one eye then smiled. "After chores and supper, I guess we'll have to go see us some holy

rollers.”

She wanted to hug him, but he was too dirty, so she blew him a kiss then raced to the house.

The afternoon crawled by, but finally, the time to leave arrived. Still better than a half mile away, Sandy spotted the glow of naked light bulbs against the evening sky. Her excitement hiked a notch as expectation brought her to the edge of her seat.

Her father cut the Ford's headlights, pulled around someone's old International Harvester flatbed, and parked.

The patched canvas tent spread taut above wooden benches with at least a hundred people milling about or already seated. He fished the makin's out of his bib pocket and rolled himself one.

Deftly, he raked his thick thumbnail across a wooden kitchen match, waited for the sulfur to burn off, then lit his cigarette.

Sandy opened her door. "I'm going in for a better look."

He nodded as she eased the door shut. "Hey," he called too loud for her liking.

She turned back. "What?"

"Don't let them make you pick up any snakes."

"Oh, Papa." She waved her hand and stole away toward the tent.

The few holy rollers meetings she'd been to indeed proved a sight to see. Hand clappin', foot stompin', arm raisin', bench jumpin' fanatics! That's what Nana called 'em. And singing? They could raise the roof, lifting their voices straight up to the sky like tomorrow wasn't coming, especially that Buddy.

Never heard for herself, but stories of him singing like an angel were legendary—at least in the Texas Hill Country! Slipping between a few onlookers, men and women she'd have howdy'ed if meeting on the square or at a real church, she kept her eyes lowered—as they did.

The view from the standing crowd in the back left a lot to be desired, but she stood there a few minutes so as not to draw any extra attention.

Certain no one looked her way, she eased past the gawkers and sat on the corner of the last bench. Her finger drew nervously on the smooth wood of the well-worn plank, making figure eights.

Leaning out, she could see the raised platform clearly. Up front, grinning like an opossum in his ironed white shirt and faded overalls, stood Elder Jones, Pine Bluff's Holiness preacher or leader or whatever they called him.

Behind him, on a deacon's bench, two men sat decked out in their fancy suits.

It was him!

Buddy Nightingale looked even better than all the girls said. So taken by his beauty, she leaned out a little further.

His full lips spread into a half smile. One that told her he knew he was handsome, but maybe not too conceited. Sandy wanted to look away, knew staring was impolite, but . . .

“Evenin’ folks. Bless the Lord.” Elder Jones gestured with upturned palm towards the strangers. “It gives me pleasure to introduce these anointed men God has sent to us tonight. I’d like you all to give a warm Pine Bluff welcome to the Reverend Nathaniel Nightingale and his gifted son.”

The visitors stood.



Buddy nodded then sat down as his father walked to the pulpit. He tuned out the old man. Whatever he said had been heard countless times before. He surveyed the crowd. Wonder if anyone from that south Texas meeting so long ago had showed?

Last spring when they pitched in Hico, he recognized a few folks he remembered from Marble Falls. The old man wanted to go back, but Buddy wouldn't have it.

He hadn't seen the golden mist or heard the angels sing but that one time, and wrestled with mixed feelings about the incident. He longed to experience what happened that night again, but also feared the burden of the gift.

The afterglow of that special service thirteen years ago lasted a long time, but vanished the night Buddy gave in to his weakness. After that, it'd only been his gift and the meetings. He loved church, the singing and dancing, and the easy money.

But more than anything, he loved the women. Exactly like his father had spoken over him.

After that first time with Ruby, he promised God not to touch another woman until married, to resist the devil. He made it, too, until his old man pulled a two-week drunk outside of McAlister, Oklahoma.

Finally, he resigned himself that when it came to women, he was weak. The Apostle Paul had a thorn, too. Weak. Like King David. Like Grandpa Charley.

The congregation stood, and his old man backed away from the pulpit. Slowly, Buddy walked to the front. His heart pounded as it always did before he sang.

A white blur caught his eyes. He cocked his head and leaned right.

Right there on the back row sat an angel, staring right at him, a picture of perfection. The bloom of youth illuminated her face, but from her neck down, a woman in every way. Buddy shut his eyes, sure

she would vanish.

“One sweet morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away.” He sang, and the people joined in. He opened his eyes. She was still there. Buddy forced himself to look away, concentrate on the song, but of its own, his gaze kept returning to the angel on the back bench.

Everything from her long blonde hair to her slim, curvy figure called to him, sang to him in the key of G.

Someone up front started jumping and dancing. Buddy finished the last verses and started another song. Finished that one then sang another. He grabbed a tambourine, leapt off the platform, and strutted halfway down the aisle, jingling the instrument over his head.

Arms shot heavenward, and heads bobbed as more and more worshippers caught the Spirit.

Buddy fixed his sight on the angel who now stood swaying in the aisle, still staring wide-eyed. He had to have her, possess her. Body, mind, and soul.



Was he looking at her? Sandy checked behind her. Nothing there for him to be staring so. Could it be? She couldn't take her eyes off him, either. What a gorgeous man.

A hand closed around her arm and pulled. She allowed herself to be propelled a few steps forward then tore her eyes away from Buddy long enough to look at the hand's owner.

A girl she barely knew from school had ahold of her. Sandy resisted real ladylike.

But Janie Kellogg held tight. “Come on, Sandra Louise.” The sweet little creature tugged. “Come on down front, and get a taste of the Holy Ghost.”

The pure innocence Janie emitted almost lured Sandy, but the social stigma attached to these people greased her gut like a dose of castor oil. She looked up again.

Leading the singing, Buddy still stared right at her.

Jerking her arm free, she stepped back. The music leader was everything they said. Everything and more.

His voice, like liquid velvet, cut straight to her soul. And his eyes, so blue and so very captivating. Sandy could gaze into them forever. If only he was anything else—anything but a Pentecostal.

Nightingale extended his hand toward her as if she was a sinner in need of what he offered. She couldn't believe he'd even noticed her at all, much less invited her to take his hand.

Something inside wanted to go, give herself to him and his pagan

religion, but she just couldn't.

A Harris didn't truck with holy rollers.

All her life, her whole family made scornful fun of them. It seemed right and natural to visit their revivals for entertainment and a good laugh, but that night, Sandra wasn't laughing.

The object of her instant adoration stepped closer. A strange fear came over her. His eyes bore into her soul, beckoning her to give herself over. She retreated another step, then somehow, made herself turn and run.

Heart pounding, she ran through all the people who would never admit, except in hushed tones or in the strictest of confidence, that they'd been there.

The sight of her Papa leaning against the hood of his car, smoking another cigarette, calmed her some. She slowed to a trot then a walk. He squinted one eye. One corner of his mouth turned up slightly.

"Was it the snakes?"

She gulped a lungful of cool spring air. A quiver ran from the small of her back to her shoulders. "No, Papa. I just seen enough of them holy rollers for one night."

Chapter Seven



ohn Robert Harris, known by most as Mister John, stopped the tractor in front of its shed and climbed down.

Inside, Emma Lee knelt over his three-row planter. The girl amazed him, always had. He pulled out the makin's, rolled two, lit them both, then handed one to Em.

"You should have been a boy."

"Don't start that." Grimacing, she inhaled then rested the cigarette on the planter's metal wheel. "Just a'cause I can tinker with your old worn out machinery doesn't make me mannish." She exhaled and winked. "I'm plenty happy to wear a dress and act helpless around the boys."

"Wasn't saying you're mannish." He stopped himself.

His second daughter was a paradox. He'd spent the last sixteen years trying to figure her out. She could twist what he said, or know in an instant what he meant, without a word passing between them.

"But you are handy."

"Handy as a pocket on a shirt. Now make your own self handy and pass me that monkey wrench, please sir. And thanks for the smoke."

He fetched the tool off the shed's workbench. "You gonna be able to fix it?"

"Sure, if I don't run out of bailing wire." She giggled.

John nodded. "Well, I'd say that ain't gonna happen." He sucked on his cigarette, making the end glow bright. "Got to run into Marble. Need anything?"

Em dropped the wrench and stood. "Yeah. Matter of fact, I need to go. Give me fifteen minutes." She stepped toward the house.

"Hold on. Where you need to go?"

"The library. That school paper I told you about is due next week."

"Ain't got time for that."

She reached into his bib, and pulled out his tobacco. "Well, then I ain't got time for tinkering. I guess you better look at some new planters while you're there."

He wrapped his fingers around her hand and his fixin's. "Maybe I'll just have to quit slipping you tobacco. Let you go back to smoking grapevines and corn silk."

"Come on, you could drop me off." Emma smiled. "Why do you have to go to Marble, anyway?"

His grip relaxed, then he let her hand go. "More seed, and I promised your ma I'd pick her up some dry goods."

With deft fingers, she loaded then licked the rice paper and smoothed the edge. "How about if you let Sandy take me? She can get your seed and Mama's stuff while I'm at the library."

John hooked his thumbs under his overall straps. The girls had pestered him for months to let them drive the Ford to Marble Falls.

So far, he'd limited Emma to their lane and Sandra to the community, but it would be all right to let them go. His firstborn had a level head on her.

"Well, let's see." He pulled out his pocket watch. "It's ten fifteen. Can you finish the planter by dinner?"

Her eyes laughed. "Easy."

"Think you can get that paper done and be home by dark?"

The mirth died. "That's not enough time. Sandy's been driving around Cypress Springs for better than a year now. Twenty miles in the dark is no hill for a stepper."

He didn't like it, but Em was right. Sandra had never so much as scratched the paint on anything she'd driven. "All right." He shook his head. "But if y'all ain't home by nine, this'll be the last time you two take the car to Marble on a Saturday night."



Sandy had no problem with the curfew. Though she loved the Marble Falls Public Library and had spent many an enjoyable day there, all she wanted that trip was to get out of there.

Her sister's pen sped across the paper as her left pointer finger drew imaginary lines across the open encyclopedia. Sandy's fingers thumped an anxious rhythm.

"How much longer?"

"Shut up," Em whispered then returned to the Britannica.

The tent meeting would be starting soon. Stopping by on the way home had been her price, and she already had Mama's dry goods and Papa's seed. "Haven't you copied enough yet?"

"I've got to have this ready by Wednesday." Emma leaned back. "You yapping sure isn't helping my concentration any."

Closing her eyes, Sandy counted to ten. Her sister might need to get it done all right, but if they didn't get going soon, she'd be liable to miss Buddy's singing.

"Hey." She waited for the bookworm to look up. "Let's go now, and I'll help you finish tomorrow after church."

A mischievous smile started at one corner of Em's lips then leapt to her eyes. "How about we go now, and you finish this stupid report?"

"I said I'll help, and I'll throw in buying you a pack of ready rolls."

"Two packs, and you've got to promise to smoke a whole cigarette yourself."

Ugh! She hated the nasty things, but she'd eat one if that's what it took. "Deal." She pushed her chair back. "Let's get going."

Forty-five minutes later, the Ford eased onto the campground's gravel lot. The tent, the overflow crowd...everything the same as two nights before, except it wasn't.

Curiosity about a legend brought her that first night, but what she had seen in Buddy's eyes and the passion he'd ignited drew her back. She set the hand brake and killed the engine.

"What now? We gonna sit here, or do we go in and see your songbird?"

"We're going in." Sandy's hand froze to the door handle. Who was she to think Buddy Nightingale would have an inkling of interest in her? Surely she misread him. He could have any girl he wanted.

Em hiked her knee onto the seat and faced Sandy. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing. Everything."

Her sister held out her new pack of Lucky Strikes. "Smoke your cigarette. They're good for what ails you."

Sandy took the nasty thing and stuck it between her lips. She could use something to calm her, help her think straight.

How in the world could she even imagine Buddy cared for her? And how did she really feel about him, anyway? He certainly was handsome enough, but...well...he hadn't been what she expected.

"Here." Her sister struck the match and held the flame out.

Puffing until the Lucky's end glowed cherry red, she inhaled a lungful of smoke, then coughed. "How do you stand these things?"

Em laughed. "Practice. Now tell me what's wrong."

"Oh, I'm just being silly." Sandy looked toward the tent,

desperately wanting to be a part of Buddy's life, but fearing she never could. She faced her sister. "Have you ever had someone look into your soul, Emma Lee? Tell you with a glance they were the one God made just for you?"

"Whoa now, wait one minute here. When did this supposedly happen?"

"Thursday night." Sandy hadn't meant to, but she told her sister everything about her first encounter with the younger Nightingale.

"Well." Em's eyes widened. "Come on, let's go. I've gotta see this guy for myself."



Buddy held the song's last note an extra four beats then let it drift heavenward. He'd already used up his allotted time, but what did it matter? The folks came as much for the singing as to hear the old man spout hell's fire.

Just as he started another hymn, the tent's back flap ruffled and popped.

Swirling dust in front of a stiff breeze whipped through the canvas. Like falling snow, little sparklets of white light filled the opening. Awe and expectation filled Buddy's soul. He stopped singing.

With each successive note, more and more of the congregation dropped out leaving only silence and the stars.

As the twinkling faded, she walked in, even more beautiful than the first night. By the time heads started turning, Buddy found his voice again.

"I'm sorry, but I thought I just saw an angel." He stepped off the platform. "Miss, what is your name?"

The heavenly being blushed. "Sandra. Sandra Louise Harris."

An auburn-haired girl almost as beautiful stepped up beside his angel. "And I'm her sister, Emma Lee."

"Excuse me, ladies, but this is as good a time as any to tell everyone something." He motioned to a bench. "Have a seat, won't you?" The folks scooted down the planks to make room for the Harris girls. "Everybody sit down. Please."

He tore his eyes away from Sandra Louise. "As you all know, tonight was supposed to be our last meeting, but Elder Jones has invited us to move the tent to the Pine Bluff Holiness Church, and keep the revival going.

"Most of you've probably heard the story how the Lord touched me a little over ten years ago just down the road. There's something special in these hills, and I feel the need for an all-night singing." He

glanced around, his old man and Jones both nodded. "But before we can do that, we need to get this tent moved.

"There's a family reunion coming in tomorrow, and they've got the camp grounds reserved. What do you say?" The handsome music leader grinned right at her. "Anyone willing to help get us over to the church grounds?"

The congregation sat silent a few moments then a man stood in the back. "You tell us what to do, Buddy, and we'll have this thing moved in no time."

In the organized chaos that erupted, Sandy made herself useful helping the women corral the youngsters and tend the little ones. Had herself a gift with the children, would make his babies a good mother.

But not Emma Lee. The baby sister hopped right in with the men helping with the hard work, acted so different from his beauty.

He sidled up to Sandra, swinging a laughing three- or four-year-old in a tree swing. "Your sister's a hard worker."

"Doing a man's job on the farm's one thing, but lifting and toting and sweating with the men out in public is downright humiliating."

"She seems suited to it."

Sandra Louise Harris ran to rescue a little brother the bigger brother wailed on. "Can you swing her?"

What was Buddy going to think of the girl? How old was she anyway?

By eight-thirty, with everything loaded but the tent itself, he made sure they folded it exactly right then traveled from group to group shouting instructions.



Sandy hated herself for wishing he would take his shirt off, and she hated it worse that the time to leave arrived.

Of course, her sister's gang made their last fold ahead of the rest. Sandy pulled her sister to the trunk of a big oak tree. "Come on, Lee Lee. We've got to get home."

"You go on. I want to see how this thing goes back up."

A gush of air whipped through the branches, followed by a loud clap of thunder. Sandy faced the wind. It smelled of cut grass. "A storm's coming. We best get."

"More the reason to stay and help."

"There's plenty of men." Sandy tugged on her sister's arm. "Who'll bring you home? Come on, let's get."

"I'll get someone to, so go on." Em pulled free. "I aim to stay."

Raindrops the size of hummingbird eggs splattered the dust

beyond the shelter of their tree. "You can't stay. Papa will tan my hide if I come home late without you."

Em laughed. "Oh hogwash, tell him I wanted to spend the night with Jorja. He won't care. Besides, he ain't ever laid a hand on you."

"Well, I'm not about to give him a reason to start." Sandy backed toward the parking lot. "You better come now, Emma Lee Harris. You know how he is."

"You go on. Tell him I'm doing the Christian thing, helping a neighbor."

Though she hated leaving her sister, Sandy knew when that girl made her mind up to do a thing, even Papa had trouble turning her aside. And, she feared her father's wrath more.

Just as she wheeled the Ford onto the county road, the big rain drops turned into sheets. "It'll be raining cats and dogs next. He's going to kill me." She peered around the windshield wipers.

Twice she almost stopped to wait it out, but each time, the rain slackened a bit so she kept on going.

A mile past the Burton place, a frightful thought struck her. She had to cross Cypress Creek to get home.

More than once, she'd heard her father and their neighbors talk about bridging the creek, but so far, all they had done was pour a concrete slab over two steel culverts. Only other way home would mean a trip back to Marble, and she didn't have the gas or the time.

The closer she came to the creek, the less she worried about being late. Em was another matter. Maybe she could turn around and hole-up somewhere, but Papa would come looking for sure.

Having him think she was in trouble wouldn't do. Maybe she should go back and get her sister. Surely the pigheaded little brat would come then.

The road veered then dipped down. Sandy stopped the car short of the water that already ran over the concrete. She set the brake and got out.

A bolt of lightning shot across the sky. A second later, its thunder echoed. The flowing water didn't look deep. Her rain-soaked cotton dress stuck to her. She swiped her hair back from her face.

Sure couldn't get any wetter.

Might as well see just how deep that dumb water is. Pulling her shoes off, she waded in. It ran just above her ankles. She trotted back to the Ford shivering.

Plenty of times, Papa ran his cotton truck through twice as much. Nothing to it. Like a mud hole. Get a running start, and don't stop. She shifted into reverse and backed up the hill.

Another shaft of lightning danced across the sky. Two seconds passed then three before the thunder cracked and about broke her

eardrums.

Good—moving away.

Bracing herself, she stomped on the gas. The Ford rushed down the hill then into the creek. Water splashed out and up, completely covering the windshield. She automatically went for the brake.

Halfway through, the engine sputtered. Sandy pumped the gas pedal. It coughed again and died just as the front tires hit gravel.

Oh Lord, Papa's going to kill me.

She set the ignition switch to start, pumped the gas, then stomped the starter knob.

The sickest, no-life noise she ever heard whined. She tried again, but it only sounded worse. She pulled the parking brake and got out.

If her idiot brat sister had come, she would open the hood and make it run, but Emma Lee wasn't there. No. She was off having herself a gay old time messing with Buddy Nightingale's tent. Sandy was too much a lady to spit, and tears never helped unless Papa was around.

What could she do?

The sky lit up with a succession of lightning bolts followed by one long rumbling boom of thunder that must have lasted a full minute.

Before she could decide to do anything, hail the size of marbles pelted her, chasing her back to the safety of the Ford. The marbles beating the car's roof was maddening. She could scream.

“Oh Lord, what am I going to do?”

Chapter Eight



J

ohn shook his head.

“Shouldn't have let 'em go.”

In the north sky, flashes of light illuminated a stage of billowing black clouds. A low rumbling followed.

“They'll be home directly.” Miranda patted his knee.

Waiting on the porch and watching the storm roll in tied his innards in knots. His babies were late, and it was his fault for letting them go in the first place.

Closer, a bolt of lightning streaked to the ground and popped him from his rocker. He reached the end of the porch as the clap of thunder exploded in the night's blackness.

He would give the girls another ten minutes. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pea size hail pelted the porch's tin roof and danced across the yard.

Miranda joined him with his slicker over her arm and his hat. She leaned close in and shouted over the racket. “You best go ahead and get them, John. Before the creek gets up.”

Leaning down to kiss her, he took his hat and slicker then loped toward the barn. “Never should have let `em go.”



“He's going to kill me.”

Quarter-sized hail battered the Ford. Through the windshield, Sandy tried to see the damage each time the lightning flashed. Each ping and pop made her sicker. “Oh Lord, now I've ruined Papa's car, and he's really going to kill me. What am I going to do?”

As an answer, water splashed high on the car's side. The Ford jerked right a bit and bobbed twice like a cork. She could hear the front tires dragging the road gravel back onto the concrete slab. Water ran across the floor board.

“Oh, no!”

Sandy frantically twisted the steering wheel back and forth trying to find high ground. The tires caught, then bobbed and slipped again. They must be near the edge. She pulled the door handle, and pushed.

Coursing water poured in when it barely opened, then slammed it shut. Panic froze her a second.

Trapped! She hated the thought, but she had to get out.

On the side where the car teetered, just beyond the concrete was a waist deep pool she and Em played in when they were kids. Beyond that, a barbed wire fence crossed the creek before it turned and ran through a marsh overgrown with willows and vines.

No doubt the pool would be over her head now. Bracing her shoulder against the door, she shoved. It sprang out. The rushing water caught it and held it open that time. Sandy stepped onto the running board then pulled the door shut.

Rain and ice pellets peppered her like rice on a bride—a bride she might never be. Nothing mattered except getting out of the creek.

Solid ground looked at least ten feet from the front bumper. Too quickly, she ran out of running board. The round wheel well offered no good foothold, and the hood's pointed nose seemed an even less likely jumping off place.

In a panic, she realized her predicament was not only aggravating, but perilous.

“Papa!” she screamed into the storm. “Papa! Help me!” The rain washed tears from her face. She grabbed the door's handle as her foot slipped off the running board. Her bare feet touched bottom. “God, save me.”

The swift moving water swirled above her waist and pressed her against the car. She grabbed the side mirror and pulled herself forward. Maybe if she reached the front bumper, she could dive then swim ashore.

The plan sounded weak, but staying put, insane.

She inched her way up the slippery, wet fender. Another eight foot of road had disappeared. The current rose past her waist. She had to get out before it was over her head, but she couldn't force herself to let go of the car.

In the next flash of lightning, Cypress Creek looked like a raging river.

The murky, fast moving runoff pushed and tugged at her, threatening to rip her loose. Her hand froze to the fender.

She couldn't let go, but she couldn't stay.

The rain and hail battered her head and shoulders. Her long hair, matted and stringy, stuck to her cheeks.

Sandy closed her eyes. "One." Maybe if she didn't look, she could find the courage to swim for it. "Two. Oh Lord, give me the courage to let go. Three!"

Water surged over her.

A branch slammed into her shoulder, jerking her fingers loose. Frantically, she pawed at the smooth metal, searching for any hold. A second wave forced her down. Water rushed over her head.

Though she reached again and again, her fingers only grasped sticks and wads of debris.

Her lungs ached. She slammed into the fence. Steel barbs cut her feet and hands as she scrambled upward. Her head broke through the surface. She gasped for air.

"Help! Someone help me!"

Another surge of water pushed her toward the turn. Her dress snagged on the wire and dragged her under again. Grasping for a hold, she clawed at the bank.

Her fingers raked against a root then found a sturdy one. She yanked hard. Her head broke through the surface again. She gulped for air, coughed, then sucked in sweet air.

Groping up the root, she found another hold and hoisted herself halfway out. Behind the willow, briars and mustang grapevines blocked her way to safety.

"Help me! Please help!"

Would she die there?

The water surged again rising to a new height. Sandy reached for another handhold, but couldn't find one. "Help! Oh Lord, save me!"

Grinding brakes turned her head. Car lights! "Help! I'm here! In the creek! Please help me!"

A wall of trashy water splashed her face and choked her. She spit and hugged the tree's roots, trying with everything in her to ooch higher. Just before her head went under, someone shouted.

For a second more, she clutched her hold then pushed herself out and up.

Desperately, she flailed at the water, managing only to keep her head above the swirling flood. A strong hand caught her arm.

"I've got you, baby."

Papa! He would save her. She wasn't alone. Thank You, God! "Oh, Papa, you came! I'm so sorry."

With her holding onto his neck, he pulled his way out of the main channel into a creek willow thicket that hindered the raging flow.

Finally, pulling from tree to tree, he made it to shallow waters.

She clung to her father's arm in the knee-deep rushing water.

"Where's Emma Lee?" He screamed over the raging water.

"Where's your sister?"

Again, relief flooded her soul. What if she had been with her? Lee Lee could have died. "She wouldn't come. They were moving the Nightingale's tent, and she wanted to see it go up."

"Fool girl." He splashed ashore with her in tow. "Come on. I've got to get you home."

"But what about Em?"

He pulled her toward the truck. "I'll fetch her after I take you to Mama."

Sandy shivered. "No. I'll go with you."

He squinted one eye. "You're soaked, girl. You'll catch your death running around wet."

"You're just as wet as I am, and wet doesn't kill you."

He opened the truck's passenger door. "I'm taking you home." He walked around to his side and climbed in. The engine sprang to life.

"Papa, please let me go. I'll be worried sick about Emma Lee the whole time you're gone if I don't." He turned the truck around.

A sob welled in her throat. She swallowed it back.

"I couldn't stand it, not knowing if Lee Lee was safe or not." Still no reply. "You know good and well if you take me home now, Mama fussing over us will cost time."

"That's a fact."

"Plus, you could save five miles cutting through Uncle James' place." She shivered. "Please, Papa. Don't take me home."



Back at the revival tent, Emma Lee's hands ached. Her back complained, and she had never been so wet, but she loved every minute. Helping erect the forty by one hundred foot tent proved almost more exciting than fixing a clock.

Maybe even better.

"Pull," Buddy shouted over the rain and wind.

She gripped the hemp rope and put her weight in opposition with it, dug her heels in the wet ground, wrangling for a good foothold.

A gust of wind caught the canvas. Emma Lee and the four men on her rope staggered forward, found their feet again, then regained the ground they lost. Buddy grasped the rope just above Emma's grip.

"Pull." The patched canvas crawled up the main support pole, spilling water over the sides. "Pull." Working together, the tent moved higher.

She ignored her blistered hands and yanked with all the strength

she could muster.

"All right. Hold what you've got, men." He winked at Emma Lee. "And young lady."

A butterfly fluttered by Em's heart. How could a man do that?

Inside, someone tied the tent's main support ring to the center pole. Buddy grabbed the rope, looped it around a wooden peg, and handed the end to Emma.

"Take out the slack so I can tie it off."

She stretched the rope. Her arms wanted to drop off, and her legs begged to quit, but she obeyed Buddy's every command, following his every movement.

No wonder the guy had stolen her sister's heart. She loved the way he ordered men twice his age around without sounding bossy. And his voice. She could listen to him talk all night.

He twisted the rope into a double safety hitch then held his hand up to Emma Lee. "Help a fella up?"

She hesitated only a second. "Sure." They locked wrists, and she leaned back.

"Emma Lee Harris, I thank you." His lips spread into a mischievous smile. "Never knew a lady so beautiful who could do a man's work."

She smiled back. "That's because there's only one of me, and there'll never be another."

He glanced toward the white-washed clapboard church.

"And you're so modest." As he slipped his arm around her shoulder, a strange warmth saturated her skin wherever he touched. "I hear the ladies have brought some quilts and hot coffee. Let's go get you warmed up."

She let him guide her toward the sanctuary. "Y'all really going to sing all night?"

"Yep. Soon as everybody gets dry and warm, we'll have us a singing the likes you ain't ever heard."



The old cotton truck bounced down the rutted dirt road. Sandy's shivers passed, but not the foreboding that hung around her neck like a plow collar. With each flash of lightning or burst of wind and rain, the knot rose in her throat.

"Can't this thing go any faster?"

"I'm doing forty. That's fast enough."

The long way around through Marble seemed an eternity. From there, it took two lifetimes to cover ten of the twelve miles to Pine

Bluff. At least the hail stopped. Sandy shouldn't worry.

Next to Papa, Emma Lee was the most resourceful person she knew. A gust of wind rocked the truck and pushed it onto the shoulder. He fought it back straight.

"Hurry, Papa. I've got such a bad feeling."

"Us ending up in a ditch won't do any good."

Lightning lit the dark sky, revealing a pale slender thread dipping out of an ugly boiling mass of blackness.

"Papa! Did you see that? What was it?"

"Where? What?" The truck slowed.

"Over there. Watch. It's real white. Like God's finger coming down out of the storm."

He pulled the truck up on the side of the gravel road and watched the sky intently. Electricity rolled again through the black clouds.

"There." Sandy pointed.

The truck leapt forward, and he gunned it when he shifted into second. "It's a twister. Watch it, Sandra. Tell me which way it's going."

Almost constant flashes confirmed the finger had grown thick and black. "It looks like it's coming straight at us, Papa."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Oh my God." He skidded to a halt, grabbed Sandy's arm, and pulled her out of the truck. A deep rumbling like a herd of trains running side by side drowned out every other sound.

The roar deepened as though the trains raced to Hades with the devil as engineer.

He yanked her down into a ditch and covered her with his own body. Sandy raised her head. Small pieces of debris bit her face before he pushed it back down, shoving her cheek into the mud.

"Stay put."

In a moment, the rumbling softened. She nudged her father off. He stood then helped her up. The perilous winds died to a stiff, strangely warm breeze. "Come on, hurry. That thing's headed toward Pine Bluff."



Church had never been Emma Lee's favorite place to be, but the all night singing wasn't like any service she'd ever been made to attend. These folks were having themselves a time picking and grinning and praising the Lord.

Crying shame the Church of Christ couldn't catch a little of what those people had.

Lanterns flickered on each tent pole. The plank benches had been

arranged in long, broken ovals beneath the shelter. Instead of leading, Buddy told all of them to sing or play whatever music God laid on their hearts.

Soon as one song ended, someone started another.

There would be repercussions and consequences to pay for her decision to stay, but getting to help hoist the tent up was worth whatever they were. And that all night praise and worship would be a nice bonus. She loved singing.

One of the fiddlers stood and raked his bow across his instrument. "Bless the Lord. He's given me a song."

Quicker than Emma's eyes could follow, the man's bow sawed the strings, producing a mournful wail that sounded like two coyotes howling down the moon. He spun around. Abruptly, the tune changed into a lively melody.

Two women jumped to their feet and danced around in the circle, twirling and throwing their arms skyward, waving at God. Before they got all the way around, four more ladies joined the circle.

Each danced in their own way. Buddy clapped and shouted encouragement. Emma wanted to join them, but her bottom stuck like glue to the bench, so she bobbed to the lively beat.

Buddy stood and raised his hands, palms up. Strange foreign words flowed from his mouth, then he and the fiddler stopped at exactly the same instant.

The elder Nightingale stood. "There's evil about. Satan's trying to kill us all tonight." He cocked his head and closed his eyes.

What?

A funny feeling wrapped itself around Emma. A part of her wanted to jump up and run away from these fanatics, but curiosity kept her seated.

Hard to believe the folks had so much fun loving God, yet what gloom and doom was Reverend Nightingale putting out? She found it all quite fascinating.

The preacher opened fear-tinged eyes. "A twister's coming."

Tornado? How could he know such a thing?

A panicked murmur swept through the tent.

"We best make a run for it," someone shouted.

"No." The reverend raised his hands. "Sing praises to the Lord. Bless His Holy Name, and you shall see your deliverance. Play, fiddler! Dance, ladies! Dance like Miriam danced when the Lord brought the children of Israel safely through the Red Sea."

At first, no one moved, then one of the fiddlers struck up a song. The tent erupted in praise. Buddy grabbed a tambourine, ran to Emma, and jerked her glued bottom loose.

"Dance, Emma Lee Harris." He winked and pulled her along as he

jangled the little drum against his leg. All the while he sang in the foreign language.

At first, she stumbled along in a daze. A tornado! Who could know that? Her feet discovered the beat first, and sixteen years of Church of Christ upbringing went by the wayside.

Though a few huddled and cried a mournful prayer, the faith of the rest overwhelmed her. She'd never danced a lick before, but she gave in to the music, leaping and twirling with the others.

Faster and faster the fiddlers played, and faster and faster the women danced. Em couldn't understand the words the people cried out, so she just danced. Their faith was contagious.

Wildly, without a care over what kind of fool she made of herself, she danced, and somehow it seemed she celebrated before the very throne of God, danced just for Him.

Twice she circled the tent, her feet barely touching the ground. Halfway through the next time around, a thunder groaned that sounded like trains, dozens of trains, rumbling and screeching.

Seconds later, a porch-size patch ripped loose from the tent. Her heart pounded and her mouth went desert dry.

She stopped dancing.

Another big patch disappeared into the boiling blackness that swirled above.

She sank to her knees. "Oh, Jesus. If you're real, save me! I don't want to die."

The remaining canvas tore and ripped loose, vanishing into the devil's wind, leaving the poles and burning lanterns standing in place, their flames barely flickering.

Like a circus magician jerking out a tablecloth and not bothering the dishes. Emma stared, mesmerized by the swirling mass overhead.

The horrible sounds of wood snapping and shattering glass added to the deafening roar.

She tore her eyes away from the storm. Most everyone stared at the destruction, but a few still sang, holding their hands in the air, reminding her of a toddler wanting to ride on the safety of his mother's hip.

Almost like waiting for God to lift them up.

"Oh Lord. Thou art an awesome God. Bless you for protecting Your people. Praise Your name for delivering us from evil." The silver-haired Nightingale joined those reaching for the sky.

Buddy shook his tambourine and danced straight toward the wall of wind.

Pieces of colored glass and white boards swirled in the twisting storm above and all around them. He turned before he reached the poles then raced around their perimeter shouting his strange words.

Completing one full circle, he stopped and held his hands out. “Be gone, Satan. And take your evil with you. Twisting winds, GO UP! Return to the clouds you came from!”

As if on his command, the black twister, made visible by almost constant lightning, rose slowly, hovered over them a second, then disappeared into the clouds. Emma couldn't believe her eyes.

“Oh my.” She looked around. “We're alive.” Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her hands trembled.

“Our Father, who art in heaven.” The reverend started the Lord's Prayer, and everyone joined in.

She'd been delivered all right, and her soul saved. Her insides felt so clean. But who was ever going to believe such a tale?

Chapter Nine



T

he hanging lanterns burned from their pegs.

They somehow saved from the evil winds.

His father prayed to the top of his lungs. “Lead us not into temptation.”

Buddy mouthed the words, but couldn’t tear his eyes from the black sky where the twister disappeared. The old man finished the prayer then recited it again. Buddy turned slowly.

Beyond the tentless poles that stood around the little congregation like faithful sentries, remains of the church building littered the ground all around.

The storm flattened the building. Everything leveled except for the worn pulpit which stood eerily untouched amidst the rubble. A Bible resting on its surface.

A realization of what happened swept over Buddy. He was God’s chosen, anointed by fire and wind, and everyone would know it. Nothing the devil would ever do could harm him. His chest swelled with humble adoration, and he raised both hands toward heaven.

“You’ve marked me for greatness, Lord. I bless You, and I’ll serve You.”

A melody rang in his soul, then words rose to his lips. “Who is like thee, Oh Lord?” He savored the spoken question a moment then let the new song flow. On the second time through, one by one, the other redeemed joined him in declaring God’s awesomeness. A lone fiddle accompanied.

After they sang the chorus through several times, a hush settled over the little group.

In the stillness, an overwhelming joy rose in Buddy. He picked up his tambourine and jangled it over his head.

“Rejoice! Praise the Lord for His salvation! Sing praise!” A woman started a lively tune, and Buddy kept shouting as the people erupted in song and applause.

“Dance, ladies!” The tambourine moved like hummingbird wings in his hand as he got louder and louder. “Dance with abandon like David before the ark. Dance before the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord Your God! Enter His gates with thanksgiving.” He beat out staccato jingles with his words. “And sing praise within His courts.”

Grabbing Emma Lee’s hand, he pulled her along as he pranced around the circle.

Everyone but Emma sang. “Let it out, girl! Praise God for our deliverance.” She pulled her hand free then twirled. Her long damp hair bouncing and swinging in the air, she leapt ahead.

The sight almost took his breath away. He wanted her. Jacob married sisters. Twin beams of light lured his subconscious from Sandy and Emma Lee and brightened the night along the country road.

Somebody was driving up, but he couldn’t keep from watching Emma Lee praise the Lord. What a figure. Brakes whined to a stop, and the headlights died.

Good. Witnesses. When the word spread, the Nightingales could pick and choose where and when they went. And bless the Lord, traveling money stuffed their strong box.

A fearful thought struck him. He stopped dancing and maneuvered through churchyard debris toward the parking lot.

The old trailer rested cockeyed against an old truck. The twister had tossed it and the other cars around some, but most looked okay. Buddy resisted the urge to retrieve their money box.

God wouldn’t let the devil take their tent and their cash, not when He knew they would need a new one. A big one, maybe even that used circus tent he heard about up in Dallas.

The old man couldn’t argue anymore. Buddy turned to stroll back just as an angry voice shouted. Emma stopped dancing then ran into the darkness, picking her way through the wreckage. Buddy cut across toward her.

He stopped three strides beyond the tent poles.

The two huge oaks that had shaded the grounds had toppled like toothpicks and sprawled across the remnants of the little country church. Buddy high-stepped his way past the tree limbs then stopped again.

Silhouetted by the pale light, Sandy ran toward Emma Lee.

They flung themselves into each other's arms while he eased closer. His angel's hair hung in dirty wet clumps. Mud covered her clothes and face, but she was still a vision.

Sandy leaned back, still holding on to Emma. "Oh, Lee Lee. I thought you were a goner."

"It took a miracle, but we're fine."

A vaguely familiar man stepped toward them. "You all right, girl?"

"Yeah, Papa. The Lord spared us all. It was a miracle."

The man looked in Buddy's direction. "You Nightingale?"

Buddy stepped within arm's reach. "Yes, sir. Go by Buddy."

"Everything fine? Anyone need a ride?"

"No, sir. I just checked the cars. They got thrown around a little, but they don't look too worse for the wear. Besides, I promised these folks an all-night singing."

Harris nodded, took both girls by the hand, and led them toward the truck. Buddy started to follow, but something about the girl's father stopped him. A chill bit his heart. He pondered the frost a second then dismissed it.

Not a man alive he couldn't handle, or a woman born he couldn't charm.

After all, he was God's chosen. He watched until their headlights disappeared then made his way through the mess. A few folks had wandered out and were picking through the debris.

A doubting sob knifed through the muffled quiet. "Oh Lord, what are we going to do?"

"Rebuild," someone shouted, and the voice sounded too familiar for Buddy's liking. He spun and faced his father. His mouth gaped. He couldn't believe what the old man said.

Though wanting to scream no with everything in him, he plastered on his church-smile and nodded. Let him have his moment. In the light of day, he would see things differently after the excitement wore off.



"Right there." Her sister pointed. "That's where we hunkered down. I sure thought we were done for."

Emma Lee glanced at the bar ditch then looked across her sister. "Were you scared, Papa?"

He nodded. "Only a fool wouldn't have been, and I'm no fool."

Emma didn't respond. She stared into the night as the truck sped

toward Marble Falls. She'd listened to Sandy's creek story, about almost drowning, and answered all their questions, but hadn't offered more.

The strange feelings inside couldn't be put into words, not yet anyway. Maybe after some time to sort things through.

"What about you, Lee Lee? Were you scared?"

"Well, I guess I must be a fool. But I thought it was . . ." She searched for the right word.

"What?"

Emma shrugged. "It's hard to say, but wonderful. I've always wanted to see someone work a miracle."

Her father threw his cigarette butt out the window. "Exactly who do you think worked a miracle, young lady?"

"The Reverend Nightingale." Emma studied him, wanted to see his reaction. He didn't say a word. Just kept driving, eyes straight ahead on the road. She started to say more, but knew well enough how he felt about holy rollers and their claims of the supernatural.



As the sun peeked over the horizon, the last carload pulled out of the parking lot. Buddy kept his church smile on until that piece of junk Elder Jones drove disappeared down the road. He surveyed the devastation once more, then climbed the trailer steps after his father who still wore a self-satisfied grin—the same expression ever since he and Jones took their little walk.

Buddy slammed the door. "Have you lost your mind, old man? We can't hang around here and help these folks rebuild. We've got to find a new tent and be in Cleburne on Friday."

"No, Son." The reverend eased himself into his chair. "My tent days are over."

"What do you mean, your tent days are over? This is the biggest thing that's ever happened to us." He spread his hands, palms outward. "They'll be lining up to have us come now. We'll be bigger than Billy Sunday."

"True." The reverend nodded. "You're probably right, `cept I'm not going anywhere."

"You can't mean that. Not after what the Lord just did."

"I mean it all right. I'm not leaving, Son. I'm staying right here and helping these folks rebuild. It's what the Lord wants. He gave me a sign."

Buddy wanted to slap some sense into his father. "I can't believe this. All these years, we've been pitching in backwater podunk towns,

barely scratching out a living. Now that we've got a chance to really be somebody, finally make some really big bucks, you're quitting? Just like that."

The elder Nightingale smiled. "I'm not quitting, Son. Only changing jobs. Didn't you see that pulpit, boy?"

Buddy shook his head. "You're not a pastor. You're an evangelist. How would you ever come up with a new sermon every week? Forget this nonsense. You can't shepherd these people."

The old man laughed. "Who says I can't? All things are possible with the Lord's help, and I'm sure the Holy Spirit intends on helping me with all those sermons, too."

"Why are you doing this? The Lord worked a great miracle here. When the word gets out, they'll be begging us to come."

"Doesn't matter. Not to me. I'm staying here. Like I said, my tent days are over. I'm going to help these folks rebuild."

He wanted to scream. Everything he ever dreamed of was within grasp, but he couldn't do it by himself.

"I don't understand you. The Lord doesn't need another backwoods pastor. You and me need to reach as many folks as we can. Preach the Good News. Spread the Gospel and finally make some real money."

"No. The Lord clearly gave me a sign. I've been planted here. This is where I'll be 'til I die."

"Gracious, old man. It was a sign all right, but not to stay put, to go. We've got to get out of here."

"No." Nightingale rose. "We can discuss this later. I'm going to lie down. Been a long night."

Buddy followed his father down the narrow hall. "Yeah. I can see it now. One fine morning, you'll wake up missing Mama. What are these folks going to think then when the great Nathaniel Nightingale goes on a drunken binge?"

"I've confessed my sins to Elder Jones. He's not going in blind, but I can tell you, it's not going to happen. I'll never take another drink."

"How many times have I heard that before?"

The old man sat on the bed and stared at Buddy until the pain left his eyes. "Last night the Lord spoke to me for the first time in years." His bottom lip quivered then stiffened. "I've had a hard time understanding why God took your mama, but now I do." He raised his eyes and bore into Buddy's.

"Well that's great. What'd He say?"

"I've always excused myself for being a drunk, but not anymore." He pointed his finger right at Buddy's heart. "And I'll not be excusing your whoring any longer either. Sin is sin, Son."

Buddy stepped back. He never dreamed the old man knew. "What

are you talking about?"

"You know good and well what I'm talking about. I've seen more than you think, and I'll not turn a blind eye to it again."

"The Lord knows about my needs," Buddy stammered. "Exactly why do you think He spared us last night?"

The Reverend shook his head. "Sure wasn't so you could keep fornicating."

"Fine. You think what you want. Give me my half of the money, and I'll be on my way."

"No, Son. We'll be using that money to buy materials for the new church."

The old man's words stuck him as deep as any double-edged sword. "You're doing what with our money?"

"It isn't our money."

"Well, half of it sure is mine."

"No, it isn't. It all belongs to the Lord."

Buddy stared at his father. How could he dispute his words? They had always said the money was the Lord's, but they had also always treated it as their own. It seemed a nice ruse.

Now, apparently, the great Nathaniel Nightingale had different ideas. "So where does that leave me?"

The old man closed his eyes and tilted his head toward the ceiling for a good thirty seconds, then looked at Buddy. "Find yourself a wife."

An image of Sandy in her wet cotton dress slithered across Buddy's inner eye. "How am I going to do that? I don't have any money—or livelihood."

"You find her, and the Lord will provide."

Chapter Ten



ometime after moonset, Emma Lee slipped into a fitful sleep without sorting out exactly what happened.

Each time she turned the events over in her mind, she came up with only one conceivable conclusion. One she wasn't about to admit, leastways not to her father. Before she got her nap out, the old rooster crowed the sun up.

Her sister poked her shoulder. "Come on, sleepyhead. Mama's got breakfast almost ready, and we got chores before church."

The delicious aroma of bacon drifted upstairs and tempted her, but Emma snuggled deeper under the quilt. "Tell them I'm not going."

"Oh, Lee Lee, you know I'm not going to tell Papa that. Now get up."

Rolling over, she stretched. "Don't you hate going to church?"

"Why do we have this conversation every Sunday?" Sandy grinned. "Seems to me after what God did last night, you'd want to go and give thanks."

"All right. All right." Emma propped up on her elbow. "But how 'bout we go to the Holiness Church and really praise the Lord?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Sandy jerked the covers off. "Now get out of that bed."

"Hey." Emma Lee grabbed, but missed the quilt as Sandy skipped back. "Give me that."

"No. Now get dressed. We've got chores."

"You're sick, you know. It's not like I got any rest last night." Emma picked sleep boogers from the corners of her eyes. "I'm getting

up, but just once I wish something would happen to keep us home on a Sunday."

Sandy opened the door. "No, you don't." Her sister disappeared down the hall.

In spite of herself, Emma Lee grinned and looked out the open window. A beautiful spring morning had dawned. The sunshine sparkled. The air smelled so fresh and new, and everything seemed greener.

The storm brought much needed rain, and soon the south Texas hills would be covered with blue bonnets and dotted with her favorites, the cheerful Indian paint brushes.

"I do thank you, God. I'm sure glad you saw fit to spare us last night."

"Come on, girl." Her papa hollered from downstairs. "You're burning daylight."

Once they reached the Cypress Springs Church of Christ, Sandy and Emma Lee fell into their usual patterns. Her older sister helped with the little kids' Sunday school, while she sat stone silent with her parents in the preacher's adult class.

In the past, the few times she asked questions, her father chided her and quoted scripture about women being silent in church.

He told her she should ask her questions at home. So, she just didn't bother anymore. Until last night, it seemed an acceptable arrangement, but now, she could hardly stand keeping quiet.

Finally, Brother Forester dismissed them.

Emma wished she could go smoke with the men, but knew better. Papa would have a heart attack. Instead, she strolled the grounds.

The grade school and church building sat on either end of a ten-acre tract. She loved the property almost as much as she hated being forced to come every Sunday. Dozens of live oaks shaded the scrub grass with a couple of pruned cedars thrown in for good measure.

Wild grapevines twined around the rusted wire fence marking the boundary with a misted green for all its budding leaves. She stopped midway at the arbor and sat at a picnic table next to an old rock barbecue pit.

"Oh God, what's going on?" The strange feeling deep in her heart spread such a warmth through her being. "Why do I hate being here? I mean it's Your house, isn't it?" She glanced skyward. "What am I supposed to do?"

The heavens held its breath and offered no answer, but she continued to stare into the clear blue sky. She wanted to dance across the yard like she did the night before, but kept her seat. Too soon, the little groups broke up, and everyone started back inside.

Against her wishes, Emma Lee marched back for the service.

How could one congregation have so much fun at church while another's worship seemed so somber and dry? Dead.

With heavy feet, she climbed the stone steps.

Someday, she would be free to spend Sundays any way she chose. Emma managed to stay awake during the song service, but after communion, dozed as usual when the preaching started.



Not Sandy.

Almost drowning the night before revived her faith, but what she couldn't understand was Papa's reactions. He had listened to Emma's story about the twister, but didn't say another word about any of it.

Once home, he shoed them off to bed, then acted like today was just another Sunday.

She and Lee Lee stayed up half what was left of the night hashing and rehashing everything then fell asleep in her bed together, something they hadn't done in years.

Usually, for the most part, Sandy enjoyed the sermon, but today, she could barely follow. The preacher kept trying to make some point then would go rambling off. Why wouldn't he mention the storm?

The taste of creek water lingered and she could still feel grit on her scalp even after washing her hair three times and drinking half a gallon of well water.

Finally, he started wrapping up his message. She closed her Bible and got ready. Instead of the usual altar call, he surprised her. "Folks, as most of you know, we had a bad storm blow through last night."

A quick elbow to the midsection stirred her sleepy sister.

"Huh? Church over?" She rubbed her eyes.

"No. Shush. Listen."

"John Harris asked if he could say a few words about what happened. Wants to give thanks for the Lord saving his girls." Emma scooted up in the pew when her father rose and walked to the front.

"Last night," he glanced at his shoes then raised his eyes with his head still tilted down. "The Lord smiled on us HARRISES. Some of y'all might have seen my Ford down in the creek on the way here this morning.

"Sandra Louise almost drowned, but God gave her strength to hold on till I got there.

"Then that twister barely missed us and Emma Lee." He looked at Miranda and cleared his throat. "Now we all know the miracles worked by men stopped when the last apostle died."

A low pitched rumble of agreement swept the congregation. He nodded his own.

“Well, I don’t care what anyone says. Nightingale ain’t no miracle worker. The Lord works in mysterious ways. Why He saw fit to spare my girls is His business.”

He swiped under his eyes then stretched himself to his full six feet. “And I do thank Him, but I’m saying here and now, it didn’t have nothing to do with them holy rollers.”

Another murmur rose. Someone said amen.

“Well.” He shifted his weight. “I wanted to thank God publicly for Him saving my babies.” He nodded once then returned to his seat.

“Amen and amen,” the preacher boomed, louder than ever before. “Everyone stand, please.” He closed the service with a short prayer.

Emma couldn’t believe it. She stormed out. Without a backward glance, she headed up the road. Didn’t have any idea where she was going, but anywhere would be fine as long as he wasn’t there.

At the school house, she turned west. She could find someone to stay with, or even get a job. Marble Falls didn’t have a clock maker.

There’d be something.

She got pretty far before the sound of tires crunching gravel sped her steps. Papa’s old truck bounced slowly up next to her. She looked straight ahead once more and quickened her pace again.

“What in the world are you doing, girl?” He shouted out the window across her mother. Emma didn’t answer, just kept on walking, her eyes glued to the road ahead. The truck inched along, matching her pace.

“Emma Lee Harris.” Her mother’s tone sounded exasperated. “What’s gotten into you? Get in this truck this minute.”

Emma stopped and faced her. “No. Not with him. I’m not going anywhere with him.”

Her father pulled the brake and jumped out. “What are you talking about, girl? I ain’t done nothing.” He walked around the hood.

“Oh? You think calling me a liar in front of the whole church is nothing?”

His face screwed into a puzzled look then softened. “Emma Lee, I didn’t say a word about you. It was them holy rollers I wanted to set the record straight on.”

Emma’s cheeks burned. “I was the one told you Reverend Nightingale worked the miracle, so I was the one you called a liar.”

He shook his head. “Not so. Now get in the truck. We’ll discuss this at home.”

“No.”

Her mother climbed down and stepped between Emma and her papa. “Come on, baby. We don’t need to be airing our wash here on the side of the road.”

“But it’s fine for him to call me a liar in front of the whole

church?"

"No one took it that way, Emma Lee."

He stepped next to Mama. Emma glared at him then faced her mother. "I'd be dead if it wasn't for the reverend hearing from God, and us doing what He said. And that's a fact! No matter what Papa says or anyone else. It was a miracle! I was there! I saw it with my own eyes!"

"Emma Lee Harris, watch your tone with your mother, young lady."

"It's okay, John." Mama held up her hand toward him. "Come on, baby. Let's go home." Her mother stepped closer and slipped her hand into Emma's. "We can talk about this later."



Emma glanced toward the truck. Her sister smiled and nodded a 'get on inside here'. She wanted to, but couldn't. Her own eyes had certainly seen what they'd seen. It was a miracle. Why they couldn't understand was beyond her.

Her mother pulled her to her breast, wrapping her arms tightly around. "Everything will work itself out. You'll see."

Anger drained from Emma Lee, then tears welled, and she sobbed on her mother's shoulder. "Why, Mama?" She sniffled. "Why does he have to be so pigheaded?"

She didn't answer at first, only patted her back then led her toward the truck, but before Emma got in, Mama leaned over and spoke in her ear. "It's just his way, baby. Your papa didn't mean anything bad toward you."



The beauty skipped inches beyond Buddy's grasp. He'd been chasing her through a cedar thicket, and every time he thought he'd caught her, Sandy danced away, laughing and teasing.

Every giggle or batting of her eyes only made him want her more. Finally, she stopped in a clearing and sat down in a blue bonnet patch.

He ran toward her, but tripped and fell. She called to him, but he couldn't get up.

"Buddy Nightingale, I love you." Her voice like the sweet cooing of a dove beckoned him. "Come on over here and sit with me a while."

He forced his feet beneath him and made himself stand. Desire swelled to painful proportions. He had to have her, but as he reached the clearing where she sat, she disappeared.

The meadow changed into a church. Sandy and another man stood before a preacher.

"No. You love me." Pain pierced Buddy's heart. Instantly, he awoke.

The sound of his voice echoed through the little trailer. He looked around then threw the covers off, grateful to be awake. The dream confirmed it. She was the one God had for him.

Miss Sandra Louise Harris won't marry anyone but me, he promised himself then proceeded to figure out exactly how he would go about making that happen.

Halfway through his second cup of coffee, a glaring oversight presented itself. Immediately, he marched down the hall.

"Hey, old man, wake up." He kicked his father's bed.

"What?" The reverend opened one eye.

"How can I go courting without a car?"

"What time is it?"

"Little after one."

Nightingale sat up. "You couldn't have waited another hour or two to ask about a car?"

"You were in such a rush for me to find a wife, I figured I'd start looking right away."

"You can trade the truck for a car." His father lay back. "Now leave me alone. We're having services tonight, and I need some more shut eye."

Well, that's settled. He figured he could trade for something nice, maybe even pocket a few bucks in the deal. The sound of a car pulling onto the gravel lot interrupted his thoughts. He pulled back the window curtain.

Elder Jones' wreck limped to a stop and died with a sputtering cough. Besides Jones, three other men Buddy recognized from the Friday meeting got out and milled around looking at the wreckage.

Before they could scratch themselves twice, a pickup loaded with materials pulled into the lot. Buddy threw on his shirt and his church smile then went out.

"Hey, Elder." Buddy waved. "How y'all doing this fine day?"

"Praise the Lord, never better." The elder extended his hand. "Your daddy up?"

"Nah. He's still sleeping. Said he needed his rest for the service tonight."

"Good. We're liable to have a big crowd. Everyone's talking about the miracle."

"I'm sure they are." Buddy chuckled. "Mercy, I've seen a lot, but nothing like what happened last night."

"Yeah. Well, nice chatting, son, but we've got work here."

Two large tarps and a pile of rope already sat heaped in the clearing where the naked tent poles stood. The other men scattered across the grounds, picking up the pieces of their broken church house.

“So, you planning on meeting here then?”

“Sure am. I want every man Jack to see what the Lord did for us last night.” The elder patted Buddy’s back. “Hope your singing voice will be tuned and ready.”

“Always. I’d rather sing than eat.” He held up one finger. “But, you got to eat some time, and speaking of food, you know a diner around here open on Sunday?”

Jones rubbed a hand across his chin. “Well now, if memory serves, Lora’s up on Seventy should be open.”

Buddy half-listened while Jones gave him directions. He really wasn’t wanting to go buy anything. He’d hoped instead for directions to someone who would feed him a home-cooked meal.

“Now after you cross Cypress Creek, you go about a half mile or so then just after the Harris’ place, turn back—”

“Hold on.” Buddy rested his hand on Jones’ forearm. “Would that be the Sandra Louise and Emma Lee Harris home?”

“One and the same.”

Chapter Eleven



ohn squatted at the water's edge.

He surveyed his predicament. The Ford rested sideways in the middle of the creek, about thirty feet from dry land. A slow trickle still ran over the concrete, but he figured they could pull the car out. He looked at his younger brother.

“What do you think?”

James knelt. “I think you ought not let Sandy drive anymore.”

“That's a given. What about the car?”

“Well, I'm afraid you're liable to pull the rear end out of your truck trying to drag her out.”

John grunted. He hated to admit it, but his brother might be right. If the Ford had bogged, he could pull until doom's day and not get her out. And in the process, ruin his only means of transportation. Maybe he should get the tractor.

“Well, fetch me that piece of rope. I aim to have me a better look.” James walked to the truck while John pulled off his boots. Before he got rid of both socks, his brother returned. He held out his arms. “Tie that around my waist.”

“You sure about this?” James looped the rope around him.

“Yeah. I need to see how bad it is `fore I try pullin' her out.”

John grabbed the rope and waded into the water. Muddy silt lay over the gravel bottom about mid-shin deep. He sloshed through to the car where the water ran just above his waist. He gripped the bumper and tugged.

Nothing, might as well be yanking on an oak tree. Brakes whined to a stop, but he didn't look. He had to figure this out.

“Hey, fellas, need some help?”

John faced the new arrival. Buddy Nightingale stood next to a

two-ton General Motors truck. Of all the people, he never dreamed the holy roller would be offering help. He pointed at the electric winch mounted on the front of Buddy's truck.

"That thing work?"

"Yessir, which side you want me on?"

"Well," John studied a minute, "ease across the creek and set up in front of my truck." He undid James' knot and removed the rope from around his waist. "Tie your cable hook to the other end of that rope."

Buddy nodded and jumped back in the GM. The cool water chilled John's legs a mite while Nightingale jacked his truck around, but the wait would be worth it if they could winch the Ford out.

What a stroke of luck. He remembered what the young man's dad had told him back in France during the war, about there being no such thing as luck.

Humph.

James tied the winch's hook to the rope, then John pulled it in. The hook disappeared in the murky water then reappeared in his hand. He untied it and bent over shoulder deep in the creek to feel along the Ford's frame.

No choice but to put his head under to secure the hook for the best hold. He came out wiping the water off his face.

"Take out the slack."

Nightingale pushed a lever, and the winch whined to life. The steel cable popped taut, strained a second, then the Ford jerked sideways. The winch wound in the slack, and the Ford inched toward dry land. John jumped on the running board.

Once the Ford cleared the creek, Buddy released the tension then unhooked the cable. "Looks like you're all set, Mister Harris."

John extended his hand. "What do I owe you?"

Buddy gripped firm and shook twice. "No, sir. I couldn't take hard money, but I am half starved for a home-cooked meal."



Sandy threw open the barn door. "Emma Lee, hurry. Get down here right this minute."

A little piece of straw drifted on dusty sunrays from the loft, but no answer followed. She stepped deeper into the shadows. "Come on, Lee Lee. We need your help. There's company for dinner, and you'll never guess who!"

Her sister's head appeared over the high edge of the loft. "So? What do I care?"

Sandy cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered as loud

as she could. "It's Buddy Nightingale, Lee Lee! Papa's brought him home for supper."

"You'll go to the devil for lying same as stealing."

"All right, fine. Stay on up there and pout. I tried. But I'm not lying. He's here, and Mama and I could use your help."

More straw fell as her sister dangled her legs over the edge. "Why would Buddy be here for dinner?"

"Evidently he came up on the creek when Uncle James and Papa were trying to pull the Ford out. He helped them get it out of the creek. Papa tried to pay him, but all he wanted was a home-cooked meal."

"And to come to our house!" Emma climbed down. "If you're lying —"

Sandy grabbed her arm. "Come see for yourself, then you'll believe me. His truck's parked in the lane."

Squinting against the bright light, her sister saw she'd been telling the whole truth and nothing but. She still acted like she could hardly believe it, even though right there, parked in the middle of their lane, was Buddy Nightingale's GM.

"I'll be. What do you know? Maybe now Papa would admit it was a miracle. Serve him right to be put in his place for once."

"You think there's some justice in this world after all?" Sandy giggled. "Now don't go causing any trouble." She hurried to catch up. "You hear, Lee Lee? Don't start a ruckus, please!"

"Hey, I'm not the one started calling people liars."

"Oh no? I believe you just called me a liar, and I didn't get all bent out of shape. Now, please. Be good. For me?"

Emma looked back. "That's different."

"But I don't even care. I just want everything to be perfect. At least I didn't change clothes after church. I look all right, don't I?"

"You always look good, even in your overalls." Emma turned around and walked backwards. "So you really think Buddy's come to see you?"

"No. Well, maybe. I don't know." She frowned. "But I know I'll never find out if you cause a big fight between him and Papa."

"Ever think he might be here to see me?" She slipped her hand into Sandy's. "I promise. I'll be good." She opened the back screen and held it. As Emma passed through, her sister added, "Unless he starts something."

"Oh, don't worry. You know how Papa is around company. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth."

The men worked together cleaning the Ford's engine, while the women whipped up a meal. Normally on Sunday evening, they made do with leftovers, but not that Lord's Day. Before everything was

perfect, her mother called the men to wash up.

“Mama. Not yet. We’re not ready.”

She smiled. “There’s plenty, Sandra Louise. And time’s getting short. Don’t forget we have prayer meeting tonight.”

Papa sat at the head of the table with Buddy on his right and Uncle James on his left. Sandy’s heart swelled so, she could hardly swallow.

Every time she looked at Buddy, he seemed more handsome. She wanted nothing more than to stare at him for the rest of her life. And stare she did until he stared back, then she had to look away.

“More pie?” Her mother slid the plate toward Buddy.

“Oh, mercy, Mis’ess Harris. I wish I was twins. This is the best cooking I’ve had in a coon’s age, but I better pass. I need to be gettin’ on over to Pine Bluff.”

Her sister, who hadn’t uttered a single word through dinner, scooted back her chair and started gathering dishes.

Glaring first at her sister, Sandy faced Buddy. “But you just got here. What’s the rush?” If only she could get away with tying him to his chair.

“We’re having special services tonight. Elder Jones wants to show off what the Lord did for us.”

Mama smiled. “But I heard the tornado destroyed your tent and the church. How are you going to have a meeting?”

“They were already stretching tarps over the tent poles when I left. Did you hear about those poles?”

“No, I don’t believe I did,” she answered sweetly. “What about them?”

Emma stopped scraping the dishes so loud.

Papa cleared his throat.

And Sandy held her breath.

“That twister ripped our canvas to shreds and practically exploded the church. It flattened the building. But left the tent poles standing, burning lanterns hanging on them and all. Definitely a miracle of the Lord.”

Sandy’s heart stopped.

Buddy stood. “Anyway, they’ll have it all ready by dark thirty.”

While Mama looked like she was holding her breath, Papa’s eyes spit fire, but thankfully, he kept quiet. Everyone knew how he felt about not abusing a guest.

Sandy pushed her chair back. “Well, if you’ve got to go, the least I can do is walk you out.”

Buddy patted his midsection. “Mis’ess Harris, that was a mighty fine meal. I hope I wasn’t a burden.”

She beamed. “Not at all, Reverend Nightingale. You’re welcome

any time. We sure appreciate you helping out with the car.”

“Oh, I’m not a reverend, that’s my dad. I’m just a singer.”

Everyone but Emma followed Buddy to the front porch, then stood there as Sandy walked him on to his truck.

He opened the door then faced her. “Why don’t you and Emma Lee come to the meeting tonight?”

She didn’t have to think twice. “Oh, no. We can’t. Papa’s real strict about not missing church.”

“Hey, you’ll be in church.”

She laughed. “Not according to Papa.”

“I love the way you laugh, Sandra Louise.” He winked, jumped into the truck, and slammed the door shut. His muscle bulged on the window’s sill. “So, when can I see you again?”

Sandy’s heart skipped a beat, but she tried to sound normal.

“Uh, I’m at school during the week and here pretty much the rest of the time.” Her father whistled. Sandy waved at him. “Sorry, Buddy, I’ve got to go. Time for us to get to church.”

The GM’s motor sprang to life. “I’ll catch up with you. Soon as I trade this truck for a car.”

Sandy walked backwards toward the house as he backed down their lane, then watched until he disappeared. He was the one. She was sure of it, but she wondered why anyone would want to trade off such a swell truck.

“Come on, Sandy.” Papa’s impatience sure could be irritating. “And get your sister. We’ve got church.”



While everyone waited on the front porch, Emma Lee slipped out the back door. She tip-toed past the hen house and was a hundred yards deep into the peach grove before Buddy backed down the lane.

When the GM started, she increased her pace. Her father’s two-tone call whistle didn’t even pull her around. She couldn’t stand going back to that church.

Not that night, not ever.

The reverse whine of Buddy’s truck died. Her father whistled again. She ignored it and moved faster. Fifty yards of plowed field and a rock fence lay between her and the road. She needed to make it before Buddy passed.

Gathering her skirt, Emma stretched her stride and reached the fence. She bounded over and looked up the gravel road. The GM sped toward her.

Lacking a better idea, she stuck out her thumb, then immediately

jerked down her hand. He ground the truck to a stop, then leaned over and opened the passenger door.

“What in the world?”

“I need a ride.” She gasped for air. “Want to go to the meeting. And I figured you wouldn’t mind.” She stepped onto the running board.

His right eyebrow arched. “I thought your daddy was real strict about you girls going to Sunday night church.”

“He is.” She scooted in and slammed the door. “And for a change, I’m going to church.”

Buddy laughed then shifted down into first gear. “I ought to take you back, but I guess you’re old enough to make up your own mind about where you worship.”

Emma’s heartbeat slowed, and she gulped a lungful of sweet air. Heading for the meeting felt like going home, except better.

“Are we going to sing all night tonight?”

“Never can tell. We’ll have to see how the Spirit leads.” He glanced over and winked. “But if memory serves, you didn’t sing a lick last night anyway.”

Not because she didn’t want to, but she had her reasons. She looked out the window.

Buddy saw the pain in her eyes before she looked away. He waited for her to explain, but she kept quiet, staring out the window. Desire welled. He’d love to have her.

A song of seduction blossomed in his mind, but he made himself put it away. It wouldn’t be right, and he could lose Sandy. There would be time enough.

He could wait. Jacob waited seven years.

He reached Cypress Creek and stopped the truck. “I hear the Lord was with Sandy last night.” He shifted into first and eased into the water.

Emma glanced at the ruts and nodded. “You ever baptize anyone?”

“A time or two. Nothing to it.”

“You want to baptize me?”

Immediately an image of a wet Emma sprang into Buddy’s mind. Dear Lord, why was he always tempted so? “You don’t have any clothes to change in to. Don’t you want to wait?”

“What if I die while I’m waiting?”

Grinning, he shook his head and shifted into second. “The Lord’s not like that. If you’re saved, He’s not going to keep you out of heaven just cause you didn’t get dunked.”

“That isn’t what our preacher says.”

A chilly tingling spread from the base of Buddy’s spine. The little

hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

“Sis, you've got to forget what men say. Look it up in the Word for yourself. Getting baptized is important, but accepting Jesus is what saves you. Not going under any water.”

“How do you know if you're saved or not?”

Buddy shifted again then looked at Emma Lee real hard. She radiated an innocence he mistook before. “Praise the Lord, Emma Lee. You did just get saved, didn't you?”

“What makes you say that? I haven't been baptized.”

Buddy laughed. “I'll let the old man explain it, but you quit worrying. It's written all over your face. You're saved, believe me. I've seen hundreds, thousands. I didn't realize what was going on with you.”



Sandy trotted back to the old cotton truck where her parents waited. “Her drawing pad's in the loft, but she's hid good. I can't find her.”

Papa whistled again, then cupped his hands around his mouth. “Emma Lee Harris. Get yourself out here right now before we're late.” The place remained silent.

Her mother slid her hand under his arm and gently squeezed. “Oh, John, leave her be. It won't hurt for her to miss this once.”

Anger hardened her father's eyes, and she looked away. The last time Emma refused to go was the last time either of them had felt his strap. She wondered what he would do. It wasn't like Emma Lee was eight, and he could bend her over his knee.

“Come on, then. No sense in us all being late. I'll deal with that hard-headed girl when we get home.”

Chapter Twelve



A

“m I really saved?”

Emma asked herself for the hundredth time then glanced over at Buddy. Her perception of him changed. Something had come over him. Before, lust filled his eyes, but now they glistened with genuine concern.

Almost like two different people. He even called her ‘sis.’

The truck slowed but rounded a curve a little too fast. Emma leaned back and pressed her foot against the floorboard. Buddy downshifted. A dozen cars, and maybe half as many pickups, already sat in the church parking yard.

Two huge piles of debris, one neatly stacked and the other looking like someone planned a bon fire, sat on opposite ends of the Pine Bluff church grounds which looked a lot better than last night.

The men must have spent most the day cleaning. They hurried around getting the makeshift tent ready.

Their design intrigued her. She would have done it a little differently, but it looked passable. The tarps stretched together would leak if it rained, but at least they should keep down the wind.

The thought made her smile. The canvas didn’t stand a chance against the wind last night.

Buddy downshifted again then eased into the lot. “Dad’s probably still in the trailer.” He braked to a stop. “I’ll tell him you want to talk.”

Emma tore her attention away from the work-in-progress and faced him. “Oh, no. Don’t bother him now. I want to help with those tarps.”

“Alrighty then.” He jumped out. “See you later, sis.”

Again with the ‘sis.’ She liked this Buddy a whole lot better and wondered which one was his real self as she strolled toward the man bossing the job. “Hey, Mister Buckmeyer, I’m here to help.”

He looked up and smiled. “Sure. Want to help me tie off these grommets?”

Soon as she made herself useful, all thoughts of Buddy Nightingale vanished. Emma Lee loved a challenge, always had.

It took total concentration, but that came easy, almost like she could slam all the doors in her mind, leaving only the problem at hand.

Being as careful as she could of her dress, she helped without saying much until Buckmeyer grabbed the last section, then she couldn’t stand it any longer. Emma Lee took hold of the tarp’s other end.

“Say, Mister Buckmeyer.” She threaded a piece of rope through the corner grommet and tossed a knot into the end. “How about we do this one a little different than the others?”

He eyeballed her hard with a silly little grin. Emma smiled. She’d always thought him handsome, but never figured he even knew who she was. It must have been four or five years since they had run into each other.

Only twelve or thirteen then, she considered him an old guy, tall and thin, but he had filled out pretty good, and he definitely noticed her.

How would he take her telling him his way wasn’t the best?

“So you think you’ve got a better idea, huh? Tell you what. If you’ll agree to call me Travis, we can try it. Keep in mind though, this isn’t a clock we’re fixing here.”

Her smile vanished. How did he know that?

“Look. If we throw this rope over that corner.” She pointed to the north. “Then do the same thing at the other end, we can stretch this thing in half the time.”

Travis nodded. “Well, I’ll be. I see it.” He smiled. “You’re right. Where were you earlier, anyway?”

Emma’s smile turned inward, and a warm glow filled her.

If she thought about it, she might see how much Travis was like her father, but all she focused on was that he was man enough to admit he could learn something from a woman. She loved his broad shoulders. He stood at least six foot one.

How old was he anyway? Must be at least twenty-six or seven. All in all, Travis Buckmeyer was way more man than boy.

Tying off the last knot, he faced her. “Not bad, Miss Harris.”

She let her eyes smile. “Why, thank you, Mister Buckmeyer, uh,

Travis.” She dipped one knee, but stopped short of a curtsy. He made her feel all grown up. “I never knew you were a holy roller.”

Where did that come from? She bit her lip and wished she could suck her words back.

His chuckle only added fire to her burning cheeks. “Well, if the story’s true, I hear you were on the verge of doing some holy rolling yourself last night.”

She looked up from the ground without raising her head. “That I was. About when that twister ripped the canvas off.” She shook her head. “I told Jesus if he was real, I wanted him to save me.”

“Did He?”

“Sure He did.” She hatcheted off the ‘He saved us all, suddenly realizing what Travis meant. “At least, yes sir, I think He did.” She raised her head and looked him in the eye. “But I haven’t been baptized yet.”

“Water or Fire?”

His choice puzzled her. She wanted to ask so many questions, but hated appearing ignorant. Better to keep her mouth shut. Folks drifted in carrying chairs and crates.

He grabbed her hand. “Come on, girl. Let me explain some things.”

He led her to the parking lot then hoisted her, without even straining, onto the fender of a sedan. Emma never felt petite before that minute, and she loved it.

Her papa used to toss her on his shoulder and lug her around, but that was before he whipped her when she was eight for refusing to go to church. She never let him pick her up since. She and Sandy referred to it as ‘the beating.’

“Tell me what happened when He saved you.”

Emma ducked her eyes again. “I’m not sure.” Her Church of Christ teachings were ingrained, even though she’d rejected them on general principles.

For more than thirty minutes, he answered questions and explained so many things, discussing her experience. He clarified about being baptized in the Holy Ghost, how it was a separate experience and what he personally believed.

His words made so much sense. He was so wise. She could sit and listen to him talk for hours. Earlier words came back to her. How did he know she liked working on clocks, anyway?

“So, you really think I’m saved then?”

“Well, only God can answer that, but the Word says believe and confess and you’ll be saved. From what you’ve told me, I’d sure say so.”

“You ever baptized anyone, Travis?”

“No, ma’am.”

“There you are.” Buddy approached.

Emma tore her eyes away from Travis and faced Nightingale.

“Yeah, we’re both here.”

Buddy walked to the front of the sedan. “The reverend wants everyone here last night to sit up front.” He extended his hand. “Come on. We’re going to sing first then have testimonials about the twister.”

Emma put her hand on Travis’ shoulder and scooted off the fender as he grabbed her waist and eased her to the ground. “Thank you, Travis, for everything.”



Her father turned into their lane. Instead of parking the truck behind the barn, he stopped it in front of the house, the Ford’s usual place.

“Find your sister, Sandra Louise.”

She trotted to the back porch, retrieved the nine-volt lantern, and started hunting. Usually, she enjoyed trying to find Em’s newest hiding spot, but that time it wasn’t a game. She didn’t think her father would whip her again, but couldn’t be sure.

Thinking her sister wouldn’t go back to the same place, she saved the barn for last. Her sister usually didn’t move, once sulking.

After looking everywhere else she could think of, Sandy followed the beam of light into the dark barn. The clean air outside only made it smell more musty. “Lee Lee? You in here?”

No answer.

Reluctantly, she climbed the loft’s ladder. “Emma Lee, if you’re up here and made me climb this ladder—”

The sound of little feet scurrying across the floor froze her. She hated rats. “Mercy, Emma, get yourself to the house.”

Still no answer. She swung off the ladder and played the light around the loft.

The new hay smelled good, but it didn’t offset the sick feeling growing in the pit of her stomach. Emma’s drawing pad lay where she left it before supper. Sandy didn’t know where else to look.

Her parents sat on the front porch. Papa took a long drag off his cigarette then snuffed the butt in the sand can. Rhythmically arching her foot off the floor boards, Mama kept her rocker moving while she knitted. Sandy hated being the bearer of bad news.

“I can’t find her.”



The makeshift tent filled then overflowed. It pleased Nathaniel the Lord sent so many new folks. "Bless you, Father."

His son held up his hands for quiet. "In a little while, we're going to hear from Reverend Nightingale and the survivors of last night's storm. First things first though. Why did we all come here tonight? We just came to praise the Lord, right?"

Buddy nodded to the fiddlers and off he sang, beating his tambourine in syncopation.

His songs flowed like water over a steep cliff, beautiful and majestic, plummeting into the depths of the Father's manifest presence. Where else could there be to go?

Nathaniel loved listening to his son sing. God blessed the boy with a gift all right. He leaned back in the cane-bottomed chair and closed his eyes; so good to be right with the Lord again. Really right.

For better than seventeen years, he'd been so angry and hurt, gone his own way, but not anymore.

Finally, he'd been able to release his wife and look wholly to God.

Buddy started a song Nathaniel never heard before. It lifted and carried him along with its words of God's power and unending love. The second time through, the congregation caught the tune and joined in.

A little taste of Heaven. Nathaniel stood and raised his hands heavenward, shouting, "Bless you, Lord." Tears ran down his cheeks. "Glory to Your name!" He loved being alive.

A soft whisper caught his ear. The words warmed his soul. His eyes searched the faces in the crowd. Of their own accord, they stopped on the Harris girl.

Instantly, he knew Emma Lee needed to go home. He stepped beside his son and put his hand on his shoulder. Buddy glanced over then stopped singing. Nathaniel stepped down from the platform. "Emma Lee?"

Her eyes widened. "Yes, sir?"

He stepped closer. "The Lord says I'm to take you home. Right now. Your folks are worried sick."



Emma plopped onto the bench. She never thought about them worrying. She figured they would just think she was pouting in the barn and leave it at that. "You sure they've even missed me? I haven't been gone that long."

Nodding, he offered his hand. It felt unusually warm, almost hot.

The warmth traveled into her. He was right. The Lord wanted her to face her father. She didn't relish the idea.

"Come on, then. I'll take you home. You folks go on singing. I won't be gone long."

Emma held onto the reverend's hand and left the meeting. Ten yards from his GMC, footsteps turned her around. Travis reined himself in and gave the preacher one nod. "Sir? We could take Emma home in my car."

Nightingale glanced at his truck. "Where is it?"

Travis nodded to his right, suddenly looking more boy than man. Emma squeezed the preacher's hand as he looked at Travis' car.

"Well, all right, I guess that'll be fine."

Travis trotted ahead and opened the passenger side door. Nightingale released her hand, but with his fingers against her back, gently guided her to the rear door behind the driver. "Scoot in." Buckmeyer closed the front door.

Emma obeyed, and the preacher climbed in the back seat after her. She never felt better. These people were of a kindred heart.

A smile crossed her lips as Travis backed his car out then eased through the crowded parking lot. She leaned back and savored the warm peace that filled her soul.

Faint fiddle music found her ear. Buddy's strong tenor stood out as the congregation followed the strings into another hymn.

"Buddy sure loves singing, doesn't he?"

"He'd rather sing than eat. Been that way since he was twelve."

Travis reached the county road then turned south. The song faded, and no one spoke. Only the engine's soothing whine sounded in the silence.

Her chauffeur rounded the bluff that gave the community its name, and the peace in Emma's heart vanished, replaced by a nagging dread. She grabbed the front seat and pulled herself forward.

Feeling foolish, she searched the dusky horizon for funnel clouds. Nothing but clear shades of cool gray and green. Her dread birthed realization.

No tornadoes, but worse. These men were taking her to face her father. She loved Papa, but of all the men she knew, he was the most stubborn, pigheaded jackass when it came to his religion.

Nightingale touched her shoulder. "You all right?"

Emma leaned back. "Yes, sir. I'm fine. It's just . . ."

Travis shifted down into second on the turnoff toward Cypress Springs.

"Hey, Travis." She scooted up again and pointed to her right. "There's a level spot. Right there, see? Before you get to the creek. Pull off."

“Why?”

She poked his shoulder. “Please, I said. Just pull off the road.”

Travis shrugged, braked, then did as she asked. She slid across the seat and jumped out before the car came to a complete stop. Flipping off her shoes, she ran into the swollen creek, then turned and faced the men, who now stood at the car’s bumper.

“What are you doing, Emma Lee?” Travis stepped forward.

“I’m not going home `til someone baptizes me. The creek’ll do. After all, John the Baptist dunked them in the river.”

Chapter Thirteen



T

ravis faced the reverend.

“Would it be all right if I baptized her?”

Nightingale sighed. “I don’t know if that’s the right thing.” He walked to the creek’s edge. “Why you doing this, Emma? Your folks are worried sick, and we need to get you on home.”

“No, sir. I’m not facing Papa until I’ve been baptized.”

He knelt by the bank. “Come here, girl. Tell me why it’s so important to get dipped before you go home.”

Emma sloshed closer to the preacher.

Though he strained, Travis couldn’t hear what she said. He braced himself against the fender and jerked his boots and socks off. While Emma consulted with the preacher, he remembered that first time he’d seen her.

July the Fourth picnic, just down the road at Cypress Springs’ school grounds, four years ago that summer. She leaned against an oak tree, drawing and quite literally took his breath away.

Everyone else either played games or watched. How badly he wanted to ask her to be his partner in the three-legged race, but figured she’d probably rather keep on drawing. Such devotion and so much attention to a piece of paper.

The shouts and cheers of the winners and losers failed to draw his eyes from her. Later that evening when his cousin Cora told him Emma was only thirteen, he could hardly believe it. He’d foolishly thought she looked at least eighteen.

Then he didn’t see her again for two years when the Harris family came to his father’s funeral. She had cried. Somehow it eased his grief that she shed tears for a man she hardly knew, and such compassion

endeared her even more.

The preacher faced him. "Travis, she wants you to baptize her."



Backing into deeper water, Emma rejoiced, her insides giddy. Really saved, clean through and through, and her father couldn't say a thing. Her salvation was between her and God alone.

Like a kid in a candy store, Travis waded in. He dug in his back pocket and pulled out a white handkerchief.

"You want to hold this over your nose?"

"No, thanks. I want my nose to be saved, too."

He smiled and nodded, then held his left arm up. "Grab my wrist with both hands." She did. He slipped his right behind her back and touched her ever so lightly.

A current zipped through her, and she shivered. She looked up into his eyes.

"I baptize you, Emma Lee Harris, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

Water rushed over her head. She'd been dead inside. Travis pulled, and the water rushed back to its creek. Everything in her tingled with new life. So alive! She loved God so much her chest might burst.



John sat on the porch steps and dug out his fixings. He'd searched for Emma Lee everywhere Sandy had looked and then some. No telling where that girl was. Halfway through filling the rice paper, he stopped.

What if she'd run off, decided to finish what she started after church? He studied on it while he deftly rolled his cigarette.

"Naw, she's hid out somewhere." He did his best to reassure himself as he raked his thumb nail across the match.

The front screen creaked open. "You say something?"

John swung around, Miranda held out a coffee cup. "I said she's hid out somewhere. Probably up a tree or curled up with a quilt off in the pasture." He took the brew.

"Did you check the well?"

"Yes. I shined a light down it." He sipped the steaming liquid. "And everywhere else I could think of."

She sat beside him. "You think maybe she walked to James?"

"I don't know what that fool girl did. She just ain't thinking straight." He held up his smoke. "As for me, I'm going to finish this

cigarette and go to bed.”

His wife patted his leg. “That’s probably for the best.” She stood. “Guess I ought to straighten up a little.”

John finished his smoke then rolled another. He never should have named her Emma Lee. She was just as beautiful as his English Emma and just as headstrong. Why couldn’t she have taken after Miranda?

Many a time, he’d wanted to tell his daughter about her namesake, his first love, but never found the right words or the right time. For a moment, he let his mind wander to the English Inn her parents owned and his favorite waitress.

Her image remained as sharp as the day she told him no. It still hurt. He put thoughts of the first Emma out of his mind—his past, not his present.

The sound of tires crushing gravel brought him to his feet. Headlights shone to the south. He watched until they turned into his lane.

“Miranda?”

The screen flew open, and his wife stopped in the doorway. “Who is it, John?”

He hooded his eyes. “I don’t know. Can’t recognize the car.” She joined him as the sedan pulled to a stop behind the old cotton truck.

His firstborn came running across the porch then into the yard before the screen slammed. “Is it Lee Lee?”

The headlights died. A slim figure emerged from the back seat and headed straight for the house. She passed her sister in the yard and kept going.

“Lee Lee!” Sandy put one hand on her hip. “Where have you been? Mama’s been worried sick.”

John pushed down his anger. He’d whipped her once mad, and he wasn’t about to ever do that again. “Yes, Emma Lee. Exactly where have you been?”

Two men got out of the car and walked up behind her.

Holy rollers!

Soaked to the bone, she stopped a few feet short of the porch. He wanted to snatch her up and paddle her good and proper. Instead, he spoke in as calm a voice as he could muster. “Why are you all wet, girl? And where have you been?”

Staring into her eyes, he saw something.

“To church, Papa. And I got baptized.”

Her mother’s hand flew to her mouth, covering a gasp. “Emma, you did what?”

The two men walked up beside her. Without breaking eye contact with him, she answered flatly. “I hitched a ride with Buddy to the tent

meeting. On the way back, I made Travis baptize me.”

“Why in Heaven’s name did you go and do that?” Though afraid of the answer, he had to hear it.

“Because I got saved last night, Papa, during that miracle you claimed didn’t happen.”

John winced. “Why didn’t you say something? We could have dunked you this morning at the real church.”

“I wasn’t about to get baptized into that stale old dead place. The real church? How can you even say that? They’re all a bunch of self-righteous hypocrites.”

“Emma Lee Harris!” Miranda shook her finger. “Don’t you talk like that. Come on inside and get some dry clothes on.” She held the screen open, but the girl didn’t move or break the stare-down.

Simmering anger in John’s belly billowed into rage. His fists balled. No one talked about the Church of Christ like that, not in his presence. Miranda came to his side and squeezed his arm. He looked past Emma’s defiant stare to Nightingale.

Blasted holy roller. “This your doing?”

The man shook his head. “No, sir. She definitely made up her own mind. Matter of fact, I tried to get her to wait.”

Miranda spoke gently. “Where in the world did you get baptized this time of night, baby? You’re still dripping.”

Em continued staring at him, but answered her mother. “In the creek where Sandy almost drowned.”

John’s gut twisted like a wrung-out dishrag. Pain inched upward, filled his chest and threatened to choke him. How could she? Emma’s eyes spit fire while his filled with water, but he didn’t blink or look away.

His baby was going to hell.

His eldest went and put her arm around her sister’s shoulders. She pushed a wet curl back from her face. “Don’t be stubborn, Lee Lee. Go with Mama and get some dry clothes.”

“No, Sandy. I can’t live in his house anymore. I only came back because the Reverend Nightingale said I should. The Lord wanted me to face Papa.”

Miranda choked back an audible sob. “Say something, John.”

He inhaled deeply then stood more erect. The words stuck in his throat, piling up on one another to deny him breath. A stabbing pain cut into his chest. As the words finally spilled, his shoulders heaved. He fought to keep the tears back.

“She can do whatever she wants.” His voice broke, and he half cried, “She’s not my daughter anymore.” With that, he turned and went into the house.



Emma looked at her mother's anguish and wished this didn't have to hurt her, but the old geezer just made her mind up. Funny how his words didn't cause her pain.

Sandy patted her back. "You're both just upset. Don't do this. Where would you go, anyway?"

"Mis'ess Harris?" Travis stepped up and stood beside Emma. "If your daughter will have me, I'll marry her tonight, and she can come home with me."

Emma couldn't believe her ears.

"Or," he continued, "I could take her to my mama's house and court her for a month of Sundays if that's what she wants."

A warm glow spread through Emma. Astonished this wonderful man wanted her, might even love her, she slipped her hand into his. He squeezed. She looked up to his suntanned face.

"I'll marry you tonight, Travis Buckmeyer. Reverend Nightingale?" She bent around and faced the preacher. "Could you marry us right now?"

He cleared his throat. "Well now, I don't want to step into a family spat here. Mis'sess Harris, what do you think?"

Miranda wrung her hands then repeatedly pressed her skirt. "Gettin' married is for life. Seems like an awful important decision's being made here in the heat of anger. Emma, why don't you come in and sleep on it?"

"I don't need to sleep on it, Mama. And I will not spend another night under his roof. You heard him. He disowned me." She choked back a flood of tears, not knowing where they came from. "He doesn't want me. Travis does. And I want to marry him. Why wait?"

Chapter Fourteen



uddy shook his head.

“I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

“Wait a minute now.” The man rubbed his chin. “Sit down. Maybe we can work something out.”

Buddy shrugged, then eased back into the cane-bottomed chair. While the guy worked his pencil down his pad, he glanced around the dingy office. Smelled of stale tobacco and sweat.

The man’s numbers didn’t mean much. Buddy had the best of him and knew it, but he loved horse trading, especially when he had the best horse, and the GMC was a prize Clydesdale.

“You’re a hard man, Mister Nightingale, but I could use that truck myself.” He grinned. “How about I throw an extra fifty in?”

“Nope.” Buddy leaned forward, resting his forearm on the man’s desk. “I best be getting down the road. Waco isn’t far, is it?”

“Now don’t go running off. Let me sharpen my pencil.” The man licked the lead end then scratched through his numbers.

Buddy leaned back. He wasn’t going anywhere without the Cadillac, but enjoyed the game.

The guy was already two hundred dollars over what Buddy thought the truck would bring. He’d been pricing `37 Caddys for months, and that was the best used car he’d seen. He hoped to get to Marble Falls before Sandy got on the school bus.

And he wanted to arrive in the car.

“Look, Mister, I need a car.” He pointed his finger at the dealer. “You want the GMC. Give me your best offer, and either we trade, or I’m down the road.”

The man swallowed hard. “You’re taking food out of my kids’ mouths, but—” He pulled out his wallet and thumbed through the

bills. "I've got eight hundred and thirty-one dollars. That and the Caddy's got to be my best offer."

'Deal' stuck in Buddy's throat. He looked straight into the man's eyes. Just beyond the greed, panic lurked. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing mechanical."

"Then what?"

The man closed his eyes. When he opened them again, a look of resignation with a little glint of relief loosened his laugh lines. "Well, some say she's haunted."

"Mercy, man. You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"It isn't what I believe. There's not a soul in Burnett County would buy that car. Come Saturday, the heirs were going to have it towed to an auction up in Dallas. You're the first to even want to drive the thing."

The day was wasting away. Buddy couldn't get a '37 Cadillac in as great shape without first selling the truck then doing a lot of looking.

"Tell you what. I'll trade, but I want you to sweeten the deal."

"Sorry. That's all the cash I got."

Buddy smiled. "Here's what I want. Tell me how the car came to be haunted, and this Sunday you come to my father's church."

The man spit into his hand, then stuck it out. "Deal."

Hesitating only a second, Buddy spit into his own and mingled his saliva with the man's. "Deal."

The paperwork, interrupted often by the storytelling, took thirty minutes. Buddy headed south with time to spare. He couldn't wait to show her his new car. She would love it, haint and all.

The Caddy ate the sixty miles from Burnett to Marble Falls like a kid eating hand-cranked ice cream, fast and smooth. Life couldn't be better. The idea of getting married had taken root, and Sandra Louise Harris would make a great wife.

Though not exactly sure how he'd make a living, he'd love her like no one else. A job didn't matter. He had better than six months' wages in his pocket.

He decided to see if Marble had a florist. Two roses for the back seat vases would be a nice touch. He slowed as he reached the city limit sign. Wouldn't do to speed through town. He cruised the square.

General Store looked like the closest thing. Roses were probably out, but maybe they had something else. The Caddy glided across the asphalt lot. His mind registered that he'd been to that store before.

When could he have? He searched his memory bank, looking around. There's been some changes, had a gravel lot back then, but it had to be the same place he'd bought a moon pie and soda thirteen years ago.

A girl caught his eye, that Janie Kellogg. He wanted to run, but

she'd seen him.

He rolled the window down; maybe he could make a quick getaway. "Hey, Janie. You know of a florist in town?"

"You bought that car?" She shook her head. "I can't believe you bought that car, Buddy. Don't you know the thing's haunted?"

"Oh, Janie." He hated himself, but got out. "You know the Word. Superstitions are from the devil. God hasn't given us a spirit of fear." He hiked one foot on the running board and quoted one scripture after another. When Fear left her, he stopped. "You understand?"

"Oh, I hear your words, but sometimes in the middle of the night —"

He patted her arm. "Just use those verses. Say them aloud, and pretty soon ol' slew foot won't even be coming by."

The sparkle returned to her eyes, and she smiled. "Who you buying flowers for?"

"Well, I have to run an errand in Cypress Springs, and thought I'd give the Harris girls a ride in my new car."

"And which one would you be sweet on?"

Jealousy dimmed her sparkle. Buddy smiled. "Who said I didn't want them for you?"

She blushed. "Don't be a tease."

"I thought two roses for my back seat vases would make this car about perfect, ghost and all."

She laughed. "Well, I was going to tell you, if it's Emma Lee you're interested in, you're too late."

"It isn't, but what about Em?"

"She married Travis Buckmeyer last night."

No wonder the old man came home so late. "You sure about this?"

"Yes, sir. Positive. Your daddy married them over at the old Buckmeyer's place. Travis and Emma Lee stopped by here this morning on their way to his place in Llano."

"Mercy." Buddy could ring the old idiot's neck. What was he thinking? "Janie, I've got to go. I'll see you at prayer meeting."

He forced himself to drive slow through town, then tore up the twenty miles to the church. The elder and a gang of men busied themselves laying out batten boards and stringing foundation markers. Buddy parked the Caddy next to the trailer then went to hunting his father.

"Elder Jones?" He hollered halfway. "You seen Dad?"

The man pointed north. "Back there."

Buddy walked that direction and spotted him in the cedar thicket that edged the church grounds.

"Have you lost your mind, old man?" Buddy stopped at the tree line.

“Hey, Son. Where you been?”

“That’s not the point. Why did you marry Emma Lee and Travis?”

“Seemed like the thing to do. If I didn’t, they’d have gone to the JP anyway.”

“That would have been better.” Buddy shook his head. “You said I should get married then blow my plans to kingdom come doing such a fool thing!”

The reverend stepped closer. “You’ve lost me, Son. What does me marrying those kids and you getting hitched have to do with each other?”

Buddy stepped back. He liked him better as a drunk. “Nevermind. You probably wouldn’t understand.”

He stalked off then fell in with the men working on the new church. Sweating always helped when he needed to think. He had to talk to Sandy, but needed to decide exactly what to say.

By supper, he still couldn’t come up with a good excuse to see her. He avoided the reverend that night, sleeping in the Caddy instead of his bed.

Not a conscious thought, but a part of him wanted to see if the thing really was haunted. If the rumor held any water, the spirit didn’t bother him. He awoke the next morning with a cramp in his foot, but otherwise fine and unmolested.

The part that wanted to meet the ghost couldn’t help being disappointed though.

The new church building benefitted half-a-day of his hard work, then Buddy begged off with a vague errand. The Caddy rolled to a stop seconds before the school bell rang.

Students poured out the door like ants from a stirred mound. Buddy got out and stepped on the running board then saw her the minute she cleared the building. As beautiful as ever.

Without looking up, she walked straight for the bus.

He’d hoped she would notice him and come over, but that wasn’t going to happen. He whistled. Sandy’s face lifted then brightened into all smile. “Hey, Buddy.” She gathered her books to her chest and trotted across the street.

“Like my new car?”

“Who wouldn’t? I love it. Why it’s gorgeous.”

“Get in. I’ll take you home.”

She glanced at the bus then nodded. Once inside, Sandy sat as close to her door as possible, looking plenty pensive, and she kept glancing around.

“Turn here.” She pointed south.

He obeyed. “Isn’t this the long way?”

“It is, but it’s the way the bus goes. I’ll have to catch it before it

reaches our place.”

Buddy smiled. She didn't seem tense about being alone with him, just about getting caught. Once he crossed the river, she relaxed. He wanted to ask her then, but the words didn't come. Funny, he'd never felt awkward around a female before.

“Hey.” He glanced over. “Did you know they say this car's haunted?”

She giggled. “Who's they?”

“Well, the man I traded with claims everyone in Burnett County knows it. Janie Kellogg about had a heart attack when she saw her.”

“The car's a her?”

“Sure, cars and ships are female. Trucks and wagons are male.”

She poked his arm and raised her eyebrows. “And all dogs are boys, and all cats are girls, I suppose?”

“I don't think that works. They'd die out pretty fast.” He loved the sound of her voice, so sweet and clear, pure with a hidden strength.

“So how did she get haunted?”

“Well, seems this old banker in Burnett took himself a young wife. And at some point, as young women married to dried up old men are likely to do, she took a lover.” He shrugged. “Anyway, the banker became suspicious and followed her one morning. When he caught up with them, they were in the back seat of her brand new Caddy.”

“Maybe they were planning him a surprise birthday party.”

“Nope. According to the car dealer, they were not visiting when the banker found them.” Buddy paused as images of him and Sandy in the back seat shot across his mind's eye.

“And?”

“Oh, not much. He killed them both then shot himself. They say late of a night a body can hear him moan and wail over his lost love.”

“And you traded your truck?”

“Why not? There isn't a haint alive can bother me. Lord's on my side. Besides, she only had two thousand miles on her. I mean, look around. She's like brand new.”

Sandy laughed then looked down the road. “Turn right up here. That's how the bus goes.” He slowed then started turning. “No, no! The other way. Left, left.”

“Oh, your other right. I see.” He navigated the turn all safe and easy. Wouldn't do to fly around corners, especially with what he wanted to ask her.

“Where's a good place to watch for the bus?”

“Couple of miles on my real right.” She smiled. “It's my grandpa's place. The family cemetery is a little off this road. We can watch from there.”

Good. So she isn't afraid of ghosts. “You not concerned about

them seeing us?"

"No. He's sick and Nana doesn't get out much."

Buddy followed her directions to the graveyard. Time kept on ticking away, and he wanted things settled. The car stopped just inside the shade of an ancient oak. He took a deep breath and faced her.

"It isn't right, Emma Lee marrying ahead of you. The elder daughter should be first to wed."

"Nothing anyone could do. She's about as pigheaded as Papa."

"Well, there's something we can do about it. Let's me and you get married."

Sandy repeated his words in her mind. She didn't know what to do. Was this some kind of joke? "What did you say?"

He took her hand and kissed it. "I said, let's get married."

An electricity from his lips traveled up her arm straight to her heart. The yes formed there, but she stifled it before it reached her mouth.

"I can't marry you, Buddy. I can't marry anyone who's not a member of the Church of Christ."

Buddy leaned over and kissed her lightly.

Chapter Fifteen



is breath smelled nice and warmed her all over.

Butterflies fluttered about her stomach like a spring flower garden. It couldn't be happening. How could he . . . it was . . . too wonderful, but it would kill her papa.

He kissed her again. "Doesn't matter where we worship, my beauty. Church is church."

"Are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're a . . . a . . ." Sandy swallowed the words.

"A holy roller?" Buddy grinned. "Actually we think of ourselves as Pentecostals or Holiness folks, but we've been known to do some holy rolling from time to time."

"And you'd really join the Church of Christ?"

"Why not? Church is church."

Sandy just stared. She couldn't think of anything to say. This had to be a dream. Buddy Nightingale wanted to marry her bad enough that he'd join the Church.

He searched her eyes. "You do believe in Jesus Christ?"

"Of course."

"Born of a virgin?"

She nodded.

"Crucified for our sins, died, then rose on the third day to sit at God's right hand?"

"Absolutely."

"Then what's the big deal?"

"Well . . . for one thing, we're a little more . . . uh, sedate?" She smiled. "I mean from what I've seen at your meetings . . ."

Before Buddy could answer, a streak of yellow rumbled in the distance.



"I'm sorry, Buddy." She hated ending the time together. "We'd better go. There's the bus."

He turned the ignition, and the Cadillac purred. "You want me to pass it?"

"No, just follow until it turns, then keep straight."

"Sounds like you've done this before."

"Never. Matter of fact, you're the first man I've ever kissed, if you don't count blood kin."

His mouth spread into the most beautiful radiant smile she'd ever seen. His eyes gleamed with a joy that wrapped itself around her and squeezed. "Really? What'd you think?"

"Perfect. Much better than one reads about." She stared at him and forgot to breathe.

How could she believe the most wonderful man in all of creation proposed to her? The famous Buddy Nightingale just asked her to marry him. Blood must have rushed to her face because every pore tingled.

Buddy slowed then matched the bus' speed. "How soon can we get married?"

Images of the handsome man asking for her hand momentarily blinded her. Reality bit her hard on the heart.

"Are you really going to join my church? I mean, you're serious?"

"Yes, I said I was."

"If I was you, I wouldn't ask Papa until you had, and if he says yes, then I'll marry you that very night."

"Fair enough. I can't come this Sunday 'cause I've committed to lead the singing at Pine Bluff, but I'll tell them to get someone else after that."

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I love you, Buddy. I can't believe this is happening."

He kissed her back. "Oh, baby, I want you so bad it hurts." The car drifted right. Sandy broke away and looked up. Buddy yanked the steering wheel a hard left. The tires rode the bar ditch for a second then found the gravel.

"You best tend to your driving."

"I'd rather kiss you." He patted her leg, a bit above her knee. His touch brought tingles and more flutters. She purposed not to respond, but she'd love nothing better than to run off with him this minute and never come back. She couldn't though. It would kill her papa for sure.

The bus turned north. "Keep going straight."

Settling back into the plush leather, Buddy rested his elbow out the window. "So how's your folks taking Em getting married?"

"Not too well. Especially Papa. I've never seen him like this."

He covered her hand then picked it up, brought it to his lips, and kissed her fingers. "I promise. We'll do it up right. Big wedding and all. Maybe that will ease his mind."

Sandy hoped so, but doubted it. "Stop up there and let me out."

Buddy eased the car to a stop then scooted toward her side. Her head got lighter, and her heart beat like a woodpecker hunting bugs.

"You know, the first time I saw you, I thought you were an angel." He leaned down and kissed her. "I want you to be mine. I need you."

She kissed him back. "I know what you mean. I've thought of nothing but you since that first night."

The bus rattled toward them with a cloud of dust trailing. He pulled her to him and hugged her tight. She melted into his chest then forced herself to push away. "I don't want to, but I've got to go."



John turned the switch then stomped on the starter. The Ford's engine whined as it turned over, but didn't catch. He shook his head. Cleaning the plugs wasn't enough. The carburetor had to be overhauled.

He allowed himself a cigarette. While he fumbled with the tobacco, images of hell's flames licking Emma Lee edged their way into his consciousness.

What had he done wrong? He thumbed a match to life and lit his smoke. For almost forty-eight hours, he'd tormented himself with unanswered questions.

Leaning on the Ford, he pondered the situation. She was gone, and he didn't know what to do. Every argument he devised rang hollow. The devil had stolen his baby.

He crushed out his cigarette and walked to the front of the car. He'd cleaned the thing until it shined, drained, then replaced the gas, and cleaned the plugs. The only thing left was taking the carburetor apart. He could do it, but sure wished Emma was there to help.

"Fool girl."

The raspy sound of his own voice shocked him. He should try to get some sleep, but couldn't bear the thought of dreaming. She'd be there, mocking him and the true faith.

His little girl, his baby, lost to a religion worse than the one he had lost the first Emma to. Were there degrees of damnation? Were holy rollers worse than Catholics?

He didn't know. The two females he loved most rejected his beliefs, chose a false faith over him. Seduced to follow the devil just like the children of Israel. Tears filled his eyes.

The pain threatened to tear out his heart. He sank to his knees and wept. "Oh Lord, are my sins so great? Why did You allow this to happen again?"

Until his voice disappeared, he cried out, but no divine answer came. Finally, he had no more tears. He wiped his cheeks dry and stood, pushed the horrible images of Em deep inside where his nightmares lived, and bent over the engine.

The Ford had to be fixed, then he could think about saving his daughter.



Emma Lee wiped her hands then tossed the towel over her shoulder. The kitchen was about there. Even her mother would have to admit it looked good.

The windows still needed curtains, maybe a yellow gingham, and a couple of pictures here and there would be nice, but all that could wait. She wasn't even sure she would stay that long.

Grabbing her sketch pad and hidden pack of Luckies, she headed for the porch. The pot roast could watch itself. She needed a smoke and some time to think.

Eight days since they got married and nothing.

What was wrong with her?

Had he changed his mind? She steadied the porch swing then sat cross-legged as it gently passed through the still heat.

Maybe somehow she repulsed him.

Em doodled as she mulled over her predicament. He said the words, made vows before God, but could she live the rest of her life with a man who didn't want her? On her paper, the horizon of the south Texas ranch took shape.

The art crowded Travis from her mind. As the drawing neared completion, a dust cloud appeared over the far treetops.

Home early; she better check the roast. At home, Sandy had been the one in the house while she helped Papa outside, but now that Emma had her own kitchen, she found women's work wasn't half bad.

Hurrying into the bathroom first, she rubbed toothpaste on her tongue. He might desire a kiss . . . At least Travis seemed to enjoy her cooking.

That's what she couldn't understand. He was so dear and sweet.

The man never complained, and he acted like he really cared, except at night in bed. All he wanted to do night after night was talk

until she fell asleep.

Before long, the screen slammed. "Hey, sweet lady."

"Hey, yourself." She faced him, wishing above all for him to take her in his arms and love her like a wife. "Dinner'll be ready by the time you wash up."

He nodded then walked to the sink. "Picked up the mail in town. You got a letter."

"Really? Where is it?" He looked toward his shirt pocket where the edge of an envelope peeked out. She went to grab it, and he whirled away. "Travis." She laughed while he twisted and turned, keeping his back to her.

"What, my fair lady?"

"Come on. Who's it from?" When he'd dried his hands, he whipped it out and held it over his head.

"Let's see. Looks like it's from, uh. Yep. Return address says Sandy Harris. You know her, don't you?"

"Quit your teasing!" She quit struggling and held out her palm. "Give it, or I'll . . . I'll burn your beans."

"Oh, no," he wailed in a falsetto. "Please don't burn the beans." He laughed and handed her the envelope.

She snatched it, sat at the table, then tore it open. "Oh my goodness."

"What is it?"

"Buddy Nightingale. He's asked her to marry him."

"Well. I'll be. I didn't even know they—"

"They weren't. Believe me. They weren't anything when I left." She read some more. "She's also inviting us to her graduation. Let's see, it was written last Tuesday. Says, 'Hey, Emma Lee.' " She traced her fingers down the page. "Here I am."

" 'Hey, it's Wednesday now. I meant to finish this last night, but Mama called me down to help set the table. Then she wanted to talk after dinner. I carried Papa's plate out to the shed. He hasn't even come in the house since you left.

Eats out there. Sleeps out there. Works night and day on that car.

Mama's worried sick. Went on and on last night about you and Papa. I sure hope y'all can come next Saturday and stay over for Sunday dinner. I can't believe I miss you so much.

There's so many things I want to tell you about Buddy. He's so wonderful. Picked me up after school again today. Oh, Lee Lee, it's hard to breathe around him.

I can't figure out why he wants me. I mean, you know he could have any girl.

If you can't come, school's fixin' to be out, and I'll get up to Llano one way or another as quick as I can. Travis better be being good to you, and

you can tell him I said so.

Write me, please. I'm dying to know what you think. Isn't this all so unbelievable? I could go on forever, but I'm going to see if I can get this mailed in the morning, or you for sure won't get it until next week.

I love you, Little Sister, and miss you so much. Sandy' "

Emma jumped up and got the meal on the table. While he ate, she silently read through her letter again. Seemed like Buddy really loved her sister. All that kissing and hugging sounded so wonderful.

Jealously made her sad. She couldn't stand things were the way they were with her and Travis. And she may never know why, unless .

..

"Travis?" He looked up. "I've got to know something."

"Sure. What, precious?"

She stared a moment. How could she say it? All her practiced words vanished and a lump threatened to choke her. She looked into her lap then into his eyes.

"Why did you marry me? Tell me the truth. Did you just feel sorry for me?"

"Sorry?" He set his fork down and slipped his hand over hers.

"Dear wife, the first time I laid eyes on you, I fell in love. And the Lord told me you were the one I was to marry." He smiled. "That was at Cypress Springs' July Fourth picnic, but I didn't know you were only thirteen then. You sure looked grown to me."

"What? He told you that way back then?"

"I didn't see you again until Dad's funeral." His eyes misted. "You cried over a man you barely knew. It touched me, and I loved you all the more."

Tears clouded her vision. "He was Papa's friend. I hated that he died so needlessly."

"Sometimes." He dabbed her cheeks with his napkin. "It got hard to have faith, keep on believing I'd really heard from Him, but when I found out you showed up at the Nightingale's tent meeting . . . seemed to me, the Lord knew what He was talking about, after all."

"So . . . if God told you I was going to be your wife four years ago, how come you never even spoke to me until the day we got married?"

"I had to wait for you to grow up." He laughed. "Always figured I'd come courting after you finished school."

Sounded pretty good, but . . . there was one more thing. "Travis, do you love me?"

"I told you. From that first moment I laid eyes on you, Emma Lee, I've loved you with all my heart. I've been praying for you ever since." He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "Sorry I married you? Never."

She heard the words and saw truth in his eyes. He really did love

her. She rose and pulled him to his feet.

“Come on, Mister Buckmeyer. We’re going to bed early tonight.”

Chapter Sixteen



mma Lee lay on her side.

She traced figure eights on Travis' chest.

He feigned death.

The sun had been up for hours, but neither had ventured from the bed. She thought about finding the sheet, but she'd lost all sense of shame the night before. She belonged to her husband, his totally.

"What I don't understand is why you waited so long. How come?"

He opened one eye. "I figured on twelve days. You were the one wanted to go to bed early last night."

"Twelve days? But lovin's so wonderful. Didn't you know? Why wait? I mean we were married and all."

"Think about it." Travis scooted up, resting his head against the wall. "For almost four years I've been waiting just to court you. Figured it might take me three months of Sunday dinners and porch sitting to win you over."

"Well, it sure didn't happen that way, did it? And now we've wasted eight whole nights."

He stroked her hair then bent over and kissed her. "I wouldn't say they were wasted."

"But they were. Why did you wait?"

"I wanted to give you a chance to back out. Can't get an annulment after consummation."

She raised her eyebrows then smiled. "Oooo, I love it when you use big words. But I'll have you know I spent the last eight days thinking you thought that you'd made a terrible mistake."

"I'm sorry, honey." He kissed her. "This is no mistake. I love you, Emma Lee Buckmeyer. Never." He kissed her eyelids. "Would ever."

Kissed the tip of her nose. "Think marrying you was a mistake."

She leaned up and kissed him back.

"You hungry?"

"Nope."

"We going to stay in bed all day?"

"Suits me."

Oh, he loved her! Emma snuggled into his chest. She'd read about love, but never dreamed it could be so wonderful. Travis was so gentle. She toyed with the idea of more, then another thought brought a smile.

"Hey, you want to go to Marble this Saturday?"

"Sure, what for?"

"Sandy's graduation. We could bring her home with us."

He laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing."

She swung her leg over him then sat up on top, swinging her long hair in his face. "Don't do that to me, Travis Buckmeyer. When I ask a question, I expect an answer."

"You're so beautiful."

"Why did you laugh when I said we could bring Sandy home?"

"Oh, I was thinking maybe that would put a damper on things." He smiled. "It was a nervous laugh, not a funny laugh."

"Well, we've got an extra bedroom. Sandy being here won't dampen anything. I promise."

"These walls are pretty thin, you know."

"We'll give her some cotton to stuff her ears."

"I love you, Emma Lee."

She laid flat against him and snuggled into his neck. "Do you really think I'm beautiful?"

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. "Prettier than a new calf. I'd rather look at you than an inch rain in a drought."

She raised her head and frowned. "I'm as pretty as a calf?"

"To a rancher, there's nothing better-looking than a brand new calf." He stroked her cheek. "Except you."

She tossed her hair behind her shoulders. "And why do you think I'm pretty?"

He studied her face then her eyes. "I love the depth in your eyes. They're never just one thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Like right now. On the surface, there's curiosity and mirth, but deeper I see passion and wonder."

"You see all that in my eyes?"

"Sure." He ran his fingers through her hair. "And your hair, I love

its color. Like a sunset after a storm. And—”

She covered his mouth with her fingers. “Tell me later.” She kissed him gently on the lips. “I’m so glad you waited on me to grow up.”

Hunger finally drove him from the bed. Emma Lee had never been so contented in all her life. If only her papa could see the error of his way, things would be about perfect.



Buddy flipped the switch off then leaned back. He was early. Sandy didn’t get out for another twenty minutes. Silly girl. He didn’t know what he was going to do with her. He’d never known anyone so afraid of what their parents thought.

A gentle breeze rustled the leaves overhead. It was a lot cooler waiting under their elm tree than working on the church building. He closed his eyes and dreamed of his angel—the most gorgeous human being he’d ever seen. After two weeks of taking her home every day—well, almost home—he’d not found one flaw.

Even the sound of her voice pleased his ears, a soprano harmony to his own baritone. Perfect height, five-seven to his six foot. All he had to do, without spoiling the relationship, was figure out a way to take her away from John Harris.

The passenger door flew open. “Hey, handsome. Give a girl a ride?”

He sat up, and Sandy slid in. “You bet, beautiful.”

She scooted next to him. “We’ve got to hurry. The bus left thirty minutes ago.”

“How come you’re so late?” He stomped the engine to life.

“It’s the last day of school, and they let us out early so I went to Marble with some friends for lunch and shopping. We just got back.”

“So you’re all finished?”

“Yes, thank the Lord. Except for graduation tomorrow night. I’m hoping Lee Lee and Travis show up.”

Buddy smiled and grunted while she prattled on about the day’s school activities until they crossed the river, then he leaned over and kissed her.

She kissed him back then pushed away. “Watch the road.”

“Mercy, girl, you’re driving me crazy.”

“Well, you need to come to our church, but not this Sunday.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to be there your first time, of course. And tomorrow night after graduation, if Lee Lee doesn’t stay over, then I’m

going to Llano to spend some time with her. Maybe a week or so.”

A whole week without her?

Why would she leave him like that?

“You haven’t told Mister John, have you?”

“No. I haven’t, but I’m going to. It’s just . . . every time I start to, something happens.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Things.”

“It’s probably for the best. Some of the men working on the church have been pestering me to sing for them. I’ll tell them to go to Pine Bluff this week.”

Sandy didn’t say anything for a moment, then turned sideways and pulled one leg upon the seat. “Why in the world didn’t you just sing for them in the first place?”

“I don’t just sing anywhere. Only sing in church and—”

“And what?”

“Never mind. You don’t want to know.” He slowed then turned east toward Cypress Springs. He straightened the wheel then glanced at Sandy. Curiosity shone in her eyes.

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that? Let’s see. You sing at church and . . .” A pregnant pause ensued. She bit her bottom lip. “I can’t imagine, but I definitely know I do want to know. So where else is it you sing?”

A chuckled escaped. “It’s a long story.”

“Tell me.”

Why had he dug himself such a hole? Him and his big mouth, how stupid could he be? “Should I try to find the bus?”

Curiosity changed to irritation. “Forget the bus. Tell me where else you sing.”

Oh great, trapped by his own words. “Well.” He glanced over. She had a determined expression. Might as well tell her, and he guessed better now than later.

“Well what? You’re driving me crazy, Buddy Nightingale. Are you going to tell me or not?” Irritation swiftly bloomed to anger.

“Mercy, Sandra Louise, you ever take no for an answer?”

“Sure, sometimes, but this isn’t one of them.”

He turned onto the gravel road past her grandparents’ place. “It’s not where, but when.”

“All right, when do you sing?”

He filled his lungs then exhaled slowly. “I’ve been known to serenade a lass or two.”

“Oh.” Sandy stiffened then turned her face toward the window.

While Buddy guided the Caddy down the road, he kept glancing over, hoping to read her reaction, but he never could. Knew enough

about women not to say anything when they got quiet,

But why, oh why, didn't he know enough to keep his own mouth shut?

After too many minutes of silence, she faced him. "Just how many lasses?"

"Mercy." Might not have to worry about ghosts in the car, but here came his past to haunt him anyway. He reached over and patted her knee. "What difference does it make?"

"None, I guess, but I want to know. If we're going to spend the rest of our lives together, we shouldn't have secrets."

That was true, but the past was the past. Why did she have to make him dredge it up? "I didn't know you then, so you can't hold it against me."

She slid next to him and kissed his cheek. "I'm not, Buddy, but why shouldn't you tell me about the women in your life? Unless you're not through with them or something."

Pulling her around, he kissed her hard on the lips, keeping his eyes on the road. "You really want to know?"

"Yes."

"And it's not going to change how you feel about me?"

"Of course not."

He looked out his window. "Don't you need to get home?"

"Not this minute."

"Do you want to go back to the cemetery, or is there another place we can talk?"

"Follow this road until it forks. The grade school's inside the bend. We can park behind the building in the shade."

Her directions led him to the two-story clap board structure that guarded the south end of Cypress Springs' picnic grounds. It needed a coat of paint, but it definitely looked like a little country school down to the brass bell mounted by the front door.

A homemade swing and teeter-totter shared the side yard with a store-bought slide that reflected the sun's warm rays.

At the north end, the steepled Church of Christ building appeared better tended, but was only a quarter the size of the schoolhouse. It struck him as funny, and he laughed aloud.

"What?"

"Shouldn't the church be bigger than the school?"

"Why?"

"Everyone needs church, but only the kids go to school."

"Oh." She glanced at both buildings then looked at Buddy. "You're trying to change the subject."

"Was I?"

"Yes, you were. Now let's get back to these lasses."

If only he could think of a way to avoid that discussion, but then he opened the stupid can of worms. If he didn't tell her what she wanted to know, he might lose her.

That, he couldn't stand. He had to have her, wanted her more than any woman he'd ever known, and he'd known more than he could count.

"Well." He filled his lungs and let out a long, slow breath. "It started when I was fifteen. We'd finished a meeting in Meno, and the old man took off on me." Buddy closed his eyes. "You ever been to Arkansas? Seen the Ouachita Mountains?"

"No."

"Someday, we'll have to go. You can't believe how beautiful it is, and during the fall, the trees put on every color of autumn your mind can imagine."

"You're changing the subject again."

"Guess I was. Anyway, the reverend gets drunk and heads out."

"Your father got drunk? Like from drinking whiskey?"

"Afraid so. But you might as well know if you're going to be family. He'd been sober three years, but fell off the wagon on his and Mama's anniversary. That's when her death always hit him hardest. Anyway, it's a whole 'nother rabbit I won't chase."

Images of Ruby flashed through his mind. Funny how he hadn't thought of her in such a long time. He paused a second and studied Sandy's features.

When God created her, he borrowed the sunshine for the glow on her skin and a couple of stars to put in her eyes. No one he'd ever known even compared to her beauty, not even his first love.

"The lady who owned the campsite where we parked. Uh, well, she sort of took care of me while the old man was gone."

"Where'd he go?"

"Off into the woods. He was real weak by the time I went and brought him back after six days. He never got over losing Mom, I guess."

"Oh, Buddy, I'm so sorry."

He shrugged. "He never drank until she died, then was barely sober the first year or so."

His sweetheart laid her head against his shoulder. "So your dad's gone, and this lady's looking after you. Then what?"

"She, uh . . ." Buddy ran his fingers through his hair. "One night, after I'd been there a few days or so, I . . . uh . . . after dinner, she wanted to show me a surprise. She'd been shopping and bought some fancy material and made me a shirt. So, she tells me to try it on, only I couldn't get my buttons undone. She helped, and—"

Buddy swallowed hard. He'd never told anyone this story and

couldn't believe he was about to, but knew he had to finish.

"And?"

"Anyway, I tried to—" He offered his hands palms up and shrugged.

"What?"

"We got to wrestling on the bed, and pretty soon, we were taking each other's clothes off."

"Oh my. How old was this lady?"

"I don't know. Thirty, thirty-five? Maybe twenty-eight. How could I be any judge at fifteen? All I know, she was the prettiest woman I'd ever seen, until I saw you."

A tear trickled down Sandy's cheek. "Did you love her?"

"No. Of course not. I thought I did for a while, but it wasn't the real thing. Nothing like what I feel for you."

"Did you sing for her?"

He laughed. "No, I did about everything else, but I didn't sing for her."

"How many more were there?"

"I don't know, more than I care to remember."

"Did you sing for all of them?"

"Not all, but most."

She scooted to her side and stared out the window. "I love you, Buddy, but . . ." She opened the door and slid out. "I don't think I can marry you anymore."

"What?" His heart crashed against his breastbone then pumped furiously. "Why? You lied to me?"

She backed away. "Please, just leave me be." She turned and raced toward the church, her hair trailing behind her like a wild mare's mane.

Even though he wanted her more than his next breath, he let her go.

What a fool he'd been to think God would give him such an angel for his wife.

Chapter Seventeen



andy smoothed her graduation robe.

She scanned the crowd for the hundredth time.

Why, she couldn't say. He wouldn't show, and it was all her fault. Why in the world had she ever told Buddy she wouldn't marry him? Was she crazy? Smart enough to graduate high school in the top of her class, but a blithering idiot at love.

Principal Shelton held up both hands. "Take your seats, folks. We're about to get started."

The stragglers found a place to light. She'd looked forward to the day all year, but how could it mean much without Buddy there? The other fifteen seniors sat with Sandy on the stage in the school's combination gym, cafeteria, and auditorium.

In the furthest corner away from where her parents sat, Emma caught her eye and waved. Sandy only nodded. She didn't know if she'd ever smile again.

Why? Why? Why had she run off?

She said his past wouldn't matter, but then it hurt so bad, thinking about him with all those other women. He'd called it right. She lied to him then ran away. He probably hated her, never wanted to see her again. She'd definitely ruined her life.

If she was Catholic, she could join a convent and be a nun.

The valedictorian stood and walked to the podium. Sandy pushed Buddy to the furthest corner of her mind. He'd be there, he would come. He knew how much it meant to her. But she needed to stop obsessing over him.

Poor Emma Lee. If she hadn't quit school, she would have been valedictorian instead. Stupid Lee Lee. Stupid, pigheaded girl. Skipped

two grades to be in the same class as Sandy, then threw it all away to marry a guy she didn't even know.

Without meaning to, she scanned the audience while her classmate droned on about the wonderful future that lay ahead for the Class of '39. Some future. She'd ruined any chance at a good future.

Finally the speech ended, and the principal took center-stage. Sandy glanced at her father. His smile threatened to split his face. She smiled back. The principal said his peace then started calling names and handing out diplomas.

Somehow Sandy made it through the evening. She shook well-wishers' hands and smiled even though her heart ached.

As John and Miranda Harris' firstborn, and the first Harris to graduate in three generations, she had to hide her pain—not to mention her worry over her father's reaction at seeing Lee Lee again.

Her sister had engaged in a short cheek to cheek conversation with her mother, but stayed clear of Papa through the whole thing. Finally, she and Emma Lee wrangled Travis away from a knot of fat chewers then headed for Llano.

Sandy had hoped she and Lee Lee could sit in the back seat and talk, but she slid in up front next to her husband.

For an hour and a half, she caught up with her sister's news, chit-chatting about everything and nothing important. Sandy couldn't bring herself to discuss Buddy in front of Travis.

Not only did her new brother-in-law know him, but he remained a basic stranger to Sandy. How her sister ever got along . . .

Just had to wait until she got her alone, no matter how hard, and the opportunity eluded her so long. Before Sandy was ready, her sister packed her off to bed then disappeared with Travis. She lay there alone, sweltering even though a bit of breeze blew through.

Though she tried to keep thoughts of Buddy in their far corner, for the life of her, he wouldn't be denied.

Over and over she replayed that last time together. With each remembrance, more tears flowed. Deep into the night, she cried over her lost love, until finally, thankfully, she slipped into a fitful sleep.

Minutes after the rooster so rudely crowed the sun up, a rhythmic squeak brought her eyes open. The sound puzzled her until the cobwebs cleared.

"Oh my." Sandy covered her mouth, afraid they might have heard her. The tempo quickened. She threw on a dress and slipped out. Get to the porch, no, the kitchen. She filled the stove with kindling, wadded a couple of pages from the Sears catalogue and threw them in, then fanned three of the five cabinets before she found the matches.

A throaty moan drifted from their room. Sandy froze then tried to

close her ears. Why couldn't it be her and Buddy? Laughter then soft footsteps came toward her. Sandy struck the match and lit the paper.

"Well, good morning. I figured you'd sleep in. When did you get up?"

Sandy faced her sister. "When you and Travis started wrestling."

The rose in Lee Lee's cheeks deepened three shades. "Guess Travis was right."

Sandy grinned. "About what?"

A door opened. Em shook her head then glanced over her shoulder. Travis strolled toward the kitchen. She winked then put a finger to her lips. "Shhh, tell you later."

"That's fine, but you're telling me everything," she whispered with an eyebrow raised.

Travis stopped in the doorway. Somewhat ignorant of the ways of women, he did know enough not to ask what they'd been whispering about. Besides, Lee Lee's blush told it all. He stepped next to his bride and kissed a flushed cheek.

"What's for breakfast, beautiful? Poke, roll, and grits?"

"Not this morning. We're having something. We just haven't decided what." Emma Lee slipped her arm around him. "Why don't you fetch us some wood then do some manly things. We'll have it ready soon, and I'll holler at you."



"Fair enough." Travis kissed the top of Em's red head then slipped out the back door. He filled the stove's wood box then retreated to the barn. Before he'd barely got started with his chores, Em's two-tone whistle beckoned him back to the house.

The steamy smell of hot biscuits mingled with his favorite morning smell—the meaty odor of fried bacon—greeted him at the back door. Em scooted a heaping plate of scrambled eggs and a bowl of grits over to make room for the biscuits, leaving an empty spot for the pork Sandy carried from the stove.

With the plates and coffee cups, elbow room proved a premium with precious little extra space on the small table. His mouth dropped open, and he stared.

"Wash your hands and quit drooling."

Travis found himself then grinned at Sandy. "Best we have your sister come visit more often."

His beloved laughed. "That'd be fine with me. Mama sent us two pints of her peach preserves, too." She licked her lips. "Mmm, wait till you taste 'em."

His jaws kept working two jellied biscuits past full then he faced his sister-in-law. "Seems to me Buddy's getting himself a mighty fine cook."

Sandy's bottom lip quivered then turned down. "I . . . I guess . . . we're not getting married after all."

"Oh?" He glanced at his wife who shrugged. She obviously hadn't heard the news either. He scratched his head. "Oh. Sorry, I guess. Maybe you girls need to take today off. There's enough leftovers here for dinner. And I could always take the two of you to town for supper."

"We're not going to church?" Sandy's lip quit quivering, but her eyes still threatened to brim over.

"We could do that, but I have stock to tend. I figured you might like seeing the house."

"But that shouldn't take more than ten minutes." She glanced around.

Her sister smiled. "Not this house, silly, the big one."

"Where's that?"

"The big house sits smack dab in the middle of the Buckmeyer Ranch. Travis' grandfather built it in 1866. Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

"Yes, ma'am. PawPaw and fifty or so freemen."

"Anyway, it's an antebellum two-story and so big and could be so beautiful. It's just been sitting since the twister in '23 ripped the roof off the west wing. Two hired hands lost their lives when it landed on the bunk house."

"Sounds beautiful."

"Wait until you see it. I'm hoping you might help me work on cleaning it up a little while you're here. I've been meaning to —"

"Sure. That sounds fine with me."

"We don't have to go today. Travis has been working on it ever since his father died. Getting it ready for me, he says."

"But . . . Oh, yes." She made quotation marks in the air. "God told him he was going to marry you." She rolled her eyes and grinned at her brother-in-law.

"Believe it or not, doesn't change it happening." He poured himself one more cup of coffee then made himself scarce.

Something always needed doing around the ranch, but lately, he'd neglected all but the most pressing. He left the sisters alone as much as he could through Tuesday, making up for his absence at meals.

And at night, true to his wife's promise, Sandy sleeping in the next room didn't damper a thing.

Wednesday morning found his feet stuck under their little table loaded with sausage, eggs, flap jacks, fresh sliced tomatoes, and three

kinds of melons. Amusing the girls tried to outdo the last meal every time, but he wouldn't say a word, as he'd be back to Emma Lee's hit and miss cooking soon enough.

"Wonderful, ladies." He stood. "I got to go to Llano today. Y'all need anything?"

"I don't." Sandy gathered the empty plates.

"I can't think of anything. I got everything I needed last Saturday." Em kissed him. "We're going to work on the big house today. When you get back, come give us a hand."

"Yes, boss. Anything else, boss?"



Emma Lee pushed him toward the door. "Get your smart mouth on to town, Mister Buckmeyer."

"Will do, Mis'ess Buckmeyer. Sure wouldn't want to wear out my welcome, especially in my own castle."

Giving him the last word, she only smiled. He winked then disappeared.

"Y'all seem so happy. You really love him, don't you?"

"He's wonderful."

In no time, the breakfast mess turned into a cleaned kitchen with the leftovers bunched in the middle of the table, covered with dish towels. It struck Emma Lee that she'd become her mother.

Only needed a little Sandy to help her with everything when the real big one went home; except . . . would she want to name a baby girl after Sandra?

With the mop, broom, and cleaning buckets loaded in the sedan, she and her best friend in the world headed out. It took concentration to keep the wheels on the two dirt ruts cut in the early years by wagon wheels.

No telling how many times the road had been filled and reworked, but with so little traffic, it'd deteriorated to the two tire-wide paths with grass growing between.

Ahead, a cow and calf stood in the middle of the trail. Emma slowed and honked, and the calf scampered away a few yards, bucking and twisting. Its mama only stared. She honked again then skidded to a stop right in front of the old girl.

"Stupid cow." Sandy leaned out the window, waving her arms. "Get out of the road."

Shifting into first, Emma eased forward. The cow lowered her head and braced her front legs. She laid on the horn and inched forward.

The front grill neared to within a foot. She depressed the clutch, still blaring the horn.

The beast swung her head, her horns missing the car's hood by mere inches, then blinked and trotted toward her calf.

"Hey, get me a cigarette out of my purse there."

"Thought you were going to quit."

"I am, but that silly heifer scared me. If she'd scratched Travis' car . . ." She shook her head. "I never smoke around Travis anymore, but . . . after that close call. Just get me one."

"You really think you're pregnant?"

"I hope, but I can't be sure for a couple more months. If I had to bet though, I'd bet I am."

"Well, you need to quit those nasty things whether you're pregnant or not. You don't want your baby stinking."

"Yes, mother. Anything else I need to do?" Emma shifted into second.

"Yeah, be a little more respectful to your older sister."

The ruts deepened and she downshifted to first, fighting the wheel until the road leveled out before she relaxed. She wished Sandy could be there all the time. Even with her so upset over Buddy, she just loved having her around.

Just after that next rise, the big house came into view. Emma loved the four white columns that held up the second-story balcony, gracing the main entrance. "Here it is. What do you think?"

"Oh wow, Emma Lee, it's beautiful. My goodness, it's a real mansion. I love the entry, and the two wings, the porch, the balcony. I love it all."

"I do, too. I can hardly believe it's going to be my house! I'm going to live here. Raise my babies here."

"I can see why. It's gorgeous."

"I can't wait to move in. Travis has been mostly focusing on the east wing. He planned to get it done before he starts remodeling the main hall. He says that the west wing has to be replaced."

"Why?"

"He says it's sat too long, and there's too much damage. All I want to do today is clean up behind him and maybe do some painting if you're up to it."

"I love to paint." On entering, ancient dust stirred a musty smell. Sandy made a face. "Phew."

"Let's get some windows opened." In no time, dirt covered her and her sister.

"So," Sandy wiped sweat from her forehead. "You really think Travis can get this house livable?"

"Why not?"

“It’s just . . . There’s an awful lot of work here, plus the west wing alone is bigger than most houses. You think he’s going to be able to do all that by himself?”

Emma rubbed her belly. “Maybe I’ll have him some help come next year.”

Sandy laughed. “Even if it’s a boy, he won’t be much help anytime soon.”

A car door slammed, stopping the chatter. Her heart seized then thumped wildly. She ran to the window. Travis’ empty pickup sat next to the sedan. She sighed, a little angry with herself for being a fraidy-cat.

“We need to go, girls.” Travis wore a grim expression.

Emma stepped toward her husband. “Why, sugar? What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Owner of the feed store met me half way to Llano. Seems your mother called with bad news.”

Papa? A knot formed in her stomach. She glanced at Sandy. “What is it?”

“It’s your grandfather. He died last night.”

Chapter Eighteen



uddy's hammer danced on the nails' heads.

A body would think he'd been roofing for a coon's age. He flopped another shingle in place, tap-started the six broad-head nails then pounded them in place with only one stroke each.

His muscles ached, and his knees would probably need at least two weeks to get back to normal, but he had found he loved working on the church.

In his twenty-five years, he never built anything, and it pleased him so many folks recognized his skill and hard work. Mercy, if he didn't know better, he'd say the Lord intended him to be a carpenter.

After the initial excitement wore off and farmers got back to their fields, his old man had hired professionals to replace the volunteers. Buddy enjoyed learning the secrets of the skilled craftsmen, even though the funds saved for so long dwindled fast.

The reverend never asked, and Buddy never mentioned the eight hundred netted when he traded for the Caddy. Good thing, too, if Sandy didn't change her mind . . .

Oh, that girl. His thoughts lingered on his angel a moment, then he put her out of his thoughts and finished his row of shingles ahead of the hired man working behind him.

Buddy stood. "Well, that's all for me. I've got to get." He stretched his back, unbuckled his nail pouch then handed it to the roofer.

The man wiped his forehead with a red bandanna and took it. "Seems you always have somewhere to go about this time of day."

"Mercy, man." Buddy smiled. "I'm not making two dollars a day like some folks I know."

"I wish."

Buddy didn't answer, knowing the fella only made a buck fifty. The reverend was generous, but not stupid.

He sidestepped across and down the steep roof then stopped at the ladder. A flash of light caught his eye. He studied the northern horizon.

Another flash shone through the tree limbs, then it emerged from behind a stand of cedars. He blinked twice, but it kept coming down the dirt road. How in Heaven's name did a 1928 Rolls Royce Silver Streak find its way to Pine Bluff, Texas?

Man, he loved that model ever since he'd seen one in New York. The Rolls, polished to a high sheen, slowed then stopped. Buddy climbed down, grabbed his shirt then walked toward the road.

The driver's window glided down. "Hello. Could you please direct us to the Pine Bluff Holiness Church?"

"Sure." Buddy jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "That's her. Right there."

"Excellent. And would you happen to know the whereabouts of one Nathaniel Nightingale?"

"You've got that right. There's only one, but he isn't here now."

The man stepped out. "It's of great concern that I locate him." He held out a map of Burnett County. "Could you be kind enough to direct me?"

Buddy only glanced at the map then pointed toward the church's gravel lot. "Park under that elm tree over yonder, next to that fancy car; the old man'll be back any minute now."

"You are sure? Time is of the essence. I'd be more than happy to go find him."

"Sure 'nough, I'm sure. He be gone to fetch us'ns some vittles." Buddy bit his cheek. He wanted this pretentious rube to squirm a bit.

"Perhaps there's someone in authority here with whom I could speak to collaborate your information?"

Buddy laughed. "My father will return shortly, sir. I'm sorry, but our church parlor lacks completion after the devastation of a recent tornado. Maybe you'd care to stand here in the road to wait if our parking lot doesn't suit your taste."

The man nodded then retreated to the Rolls, eyes showing a hint of irritation. Buddy admired the car as it pulled onto the gravel. What a sleek work of art. Mercy, he not only loved her contours, but the purr of her twelve cylinders.

Yes, sir, he'd swap the Caddy straight up and never look back.

Best get cleaned up. He had a funeral to go to, so he headed for the trailer. While he washed the day's sweat and grime off, he continued his debate.

Even before the news reached Sandy, Buddy knew about her

grandfather dying. For two days, he argued with himself about going. He slipped on his suit pants.

A whole week had gone by since she told him she couldn't marry him. Surely, time had changed her mind. At least, that's how he prayed.

Quickly dressing, he stepped out. The Rolls rested in regal splendor twenty yards or so from his Caddy, but the driver and a heavyset older woman stood all the way across the lot under the shade of an oak.

Buddy straightened his tie then strolled toward the odd couple. He should make amends for his intolerable behavior.

"Hey." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Buddy Nightingale. Sorry if I was rude."

The man grabbed his hand and shook. "No offense taken. Your father hasn't returned."

Buddy pulled out his pocket watch. "Really should be any minute now. He and Elder Jones have been gone a good hour."

"Any chance we could go to wherever it is he went? As I indicated, time is of the essence, young man."

Buddy looked at his watch again. If he was going, he had to leave. "I could tell you how to get there, but you'd probably get lost. He's bringing dinner for the men, so he's definitely coming back. He should already be here."

The man's stoic expression changed ever so slightly then he nodded. Buddy stepped back, squashing his curiosity. "Well, good meeting you folks, but I've got a funeral to attend." He turned and walked toward the Caddy.

Before he reached the lot, footsteps turned him around. The dark-skinned woman hurried toward him.

"Stop." She grabbed Buddy's arm. "Don't go near that car."

"I'm not going to hurt your car, lady." Buddy patted her hand then gently pried it off his arm.

"Not Madam's car, that other one."

Buddy glanced over his shoulder. The only other car in close vicinity was the Cadillac. "I'm afraid I have to, ma'am. That's the only one I got."

The woman crossed herself then spat. "Then I advise you to sell it as fast as you can and buy another, mister. The thing's haunted."

Seemed everyone knew about the banker killing his wife. "No, it isn't. I don't know who's spreading that rumor, but my car's not haunted."

The woman crossed herself again, but didn't spit that time. "No one had to tell me anything. I saw the ghost. He's big. Bigger than you. With a bald head and eyes so sad. He strives to ruin everything

around him.” She spit toward the Caddy.

“That’s just silly.”

“You’ll never win your true love as long as you own that car.”

A chill danced over Buddy’s heart. “You’re crazy, old woman.”

“No, young man, I’m Calliope. A gypsy knows about troubled spirits, and I warn you. That car is haunted by one of the worst I’ve ever seen.”

He smiled. The chill had passed, and this old woman was making him late. “I’ll keep what you’ve said in mind, but right now, I’ve got to get to a funeral.”

The gypsy crossed herself and spit once more. “Beware, Buddy. That ghost can’t rest.”

He nodded and backed away. Behind the strange woman, the Roll’s driver shook his head then circled his finger around his ear. Buddy wanted to agree, but the gypsy seemed so dead sure.

Maybe he should go to Burnett and find out what the banker looked like.

Her spooky words echoed through his mind while he drove toward Cypress Springs, then the sickening rhythmic thuds of a flat tire beat out all thoughts of haints.

Forty-five precious minutes later, he pulled back onto the road. Buddy hated being late. He rounded the curve at the school building and the Church of Christ came into view.

The funeral procession was pulling out. The Harris patriarch’s coffin lay in an open hearse pulled by a matched pair of draft horses. Buddy parked at the school and stood at attention while the quarter-mile string of cars and trucks crawled toward him.

When his angel passed by, her eyes red and swollen, his heart ripped anew. It took everything in him not to run to her. He wasn’t family—yet. Buddy eased the Cadillac in behind the last car.

Somehow, he’d make Sandy understand that his past didn’t matter, would never repeat itself.

He reached the Harris family cemetery before the sun touched the treetops, but in no time, the Texas heat caused sweat to trickle between his shoulder blades.

The sweet smell of fresh cut grass and all the flowers wafted on what little breeze blew from across the road. He hung back while the mourners crowded around the newly dug grave.

From the live oaks that guarded the perimeters of the half acre burial plot, locusts sawed a staccato dirge that seemed to lament Mister Harris’ passing. Numerous ladies fanned the still air in time with the insects.

It pleased him so many folks turned out. The death of a loved one hit the family hard enough, but to face it with only a few mourners . . .

. A shudder sound escaped.

While the preacher said his peace, Buddy thought back to his mother's funeral. A crowd almost as large as Mister Harris' sent her home.

Anyone with that many friends and family members must have been someone he would have liked to have known.

The minister closed his Bible and nodded at three women standing on the backside of the grave. The ladies' heads dipped in response, then they opened their mouths and sang. Buddy cringed at their nasal twang a fraction off-key.

Shame someone hadn't brought a pitch pipe. They finished Rock of Ages, took a collective breath, and went right into Beyond the Sunset.

To say they sang like crows would have been kind. Their song—and he used the term very loosely—hurt Buddy's ears. Mercifully, they only butchered one stanza then finished with the chorus.

One by one, the grieving family filed past the casket, while those in the back drifted to their cars. From the second row of folding chairs, Sandy stood, unpinned her carnation, then walked up and laid it on the pine box. Buddy's vision blurred.

If only there was something he could do.

In the midst of his pain, a song came strong to mind. He held his tongue a moment, but the up-tempo tune wouldn't be denied. Barely above a whisper, he sang clear and crystal sweet.

"One fine morning when this life is over, I'll fly away." He raised his head and looked straight at his angel. His voice strengthened. "To a place on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away."

His song must have caught Sandy's ear because she turned and faced him. Her smile birthed new hope. He belted out the chorus with celebration rising in his spirit. What better place could a man be than in the Holy Presence of the Almighty?

"I'll . . ." Buddy chopped the whole note into quarters and sixteenths letting the new melody lead him. ". . . fly away to Glory. Yes, I'll fly away." He smiled, seeing his words flow into Sandy's soul and ease her pain.

The others standing about hushed their murmured conversations and stared. His angel's feet carried her in his direction. Tears ran down Buddy's cheeks. Why should his past matter? He loved her. Surely God would give her the grace to forgive him.

"When I die . . ." He half sang, half shouted, "Hallelujah!" then slipped into a harmonic falsetto, holding each of the next three notes four full beats. "By and by." Coming back to the melody, Buddy looked into the clear blue summer sky.

Huge fluffy clouds floated ever so slowly across the blue expanse.

All was right in God's Heaven.

He raised one hand, closed his eyes, and waved at God. "I'll fly away."

The old woman who sat between Mister John and his brother James during the graveside service stepped next to Sandy and hugged her. Buddy discerned a Holy Spirit peace radiating from the aged face.

Smiling mischievously, he lowered his hand, holding it out toward her. "Just a few more weary days and then, you'll fly way."

Sandy squeezed her grandmother tight then arm and arm, they floated closer to him. The old woman grasped Buddy's offering in her own crippled arthritic hand. "To join him there where joy will never end. You'll fly away."

Nana pulled him down and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, young man. Would you mind singing another?"

Buddy returned her kiss and smiled. "Anything you want, Mis'ess Harris."

"Sing 'Amazing Grace' for me?"

"It's one of my favorites. I'd be happy to." He released his velvet tenor and reached his other hand toward Sandy. Hers slipped into his, and she mouthed, "I love you."

With tears streaming down his cheeks, he sang. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound." She loved him. "That saved a wretch like me." She'd forgiven him. Bless the Lord. "I once was lost, but now I'm found." Nothing would ever separate them again. "Was blind, but now I see."

Turning toward her grandmother, he pulled Nana's hand to his chest and sang from the depths of his soul, looking into her faded blue-gray eyes.

"When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun." They could have heard him in the next county. He maneuvered flawlessly in, through, and around the melody adding the notes he heard in his head. How awesome, praising the Most High God for eternity. "We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun."

New tears flowed down the wrinkled face, but her eyes brightened a bit. Sandy reached over and lovingly wiped her grandmother's cheek. "This is Buddy Nightingale, Nana. He's the man I'm going to marry."

"Marry? Lands sakes, child, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I just this minute decided." He squeezed her hand. Sandy looked up and smiled. "You're the first to know."

"Well, sounds like you've made up your mind." Nana daubed her cheeks with a lacy hanky then faced him. "And what do you think of my granddaughter, Mister Nightingale?"

“I think she’s an angel, Nana. Probably took after you.”

“Oh my gracious. What a charmer. Well, anyway, your name certainly fits. Thank you again for singing.”

A few folks had left, but most resumed their conversations in small groups between the cars. Sandy patted her grandmother’s back.

“Are you ready to go yet?”

Nana’s gaze fell on the grave. “Is it time already?”

“Not till you’re ready.”

She looked a long time then nodded. “Guess so then, sweetheart. Where’s John?”

Sandy turned around. Her father and sister stood by the far fence row, next to a giant live oak. It had to warm her heart to see them talking again. The rift had really troubled her. All of a sudden, her father shook his head and pointed right at him.

Fire danced from his eyes.

“Doesn’t matter.” Mister John spoke too loud. “Sandy will never marry Buddy Nightingale.”

Chapter Nineteen



A

sharp stinging in Sandy's nose brought her back.

Oh, she'd been in a most wonderful place. One where she and Buddy were together.

Her father's words rang in her ears, but he was wrong. He had to be. She'd found the love of her life, her whole reason for being. Papa just had to understand. She never wanted to hurt him, but . . . Oh, Buddy.

"Get out of that bed, Sandra Louise. I swan! Fainting so Buddy would have to carry you. Isn't that going a little too far?"

She rolled over toward the wall. "Oh, go away, Lee Lee. You've ruined my life."

"You can't say that. Leastwise, not yet. Nana's talking to Papa."

Sandy's eyes opened. Emma Lee held an ammonia-soaked rag inches from her nose. Sandy shied away. "All right, all right, Miss Know-It-All. What are they talking about?"

"You and Buddy."

Pushing the rag away, Sandy sat up. "What time is it? Where's Buddy?"

"About five-thirty, I think. Buddy's sitting on the porch listening to Nana tell Papa how wrong he is."

Sandy stood and smoothed her dress. "So, how do I look?"

"Fine. Now get on down there. It's your life they're deciding."

Emma Lee stopped at the door and turned back. "I'll help Mama get the food set out. You can't believe how much everybody brought." She giggled. "'Course, most of them are downstairs waiting to eat, too."

Good advice. Sandy threw her shoulders back. No matter what, she should have a say. She marched out, but halfway down the stairs,

her resolve weakened. How could she ever go against Papa?

It almost killed him when Lee Lee married Travis.

The sound of Buddy's voice stopped her cold at the landing; she leaned against the wall.

God had to do something. She needed a miracle. How could she spend the rest of her life without the music of his voice filling her soul?

She eased down the last three steps then stopped again at the screen door. Buddy and her grandmother sat together on the swing across from her father, who busied himself peeling a peach. His anger had faded. In its place though, a pain that made her heart ache, had dimmed his eyes. She lingered a moment. She loved him so much.

Then she looked at her beloved, and her ache disappeared.

Papa cut the fruit in thirds and handed Buddy and Nana a piece. He slurped his, then pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his knife. "You serious, son?"

"Yes, sir, absolutely. Like I told Sandy, church is church. I haven't belonged to one since I was ten, and I don't remember that much about it. But whatever it takes, sir—"

"You mean you've been traipsing all over the country with that father of yours with nothing but a tent to worship in your whole life?"

"Yes, sir, mostly. Guess you could liken it to Abraham. We've been wandering around in a strange land. Holding revivals has been exciting, fun at times, but I'm ready to settle down. I've found the girl of my dreams."

Sandy's heart swelled. Buddy made everything right. She fluffed her hair and reached for the screen. The movement must have caught her father's eye. He turned. His sadness broke her heart anew.

"Feeling better, girl?"

Stepping through the door, she stared into his eyes. "Yes, sir. Suppose so." She turned and eased it back in place without even the slightest slam. "I'm fine."

Nana smiled. "Good, sweetie. I'm so glad to hear that."

Her father motioned to the empty rope-bottomed chair next to Buddy. "This man here tells me that he loves you, wants to marry you. How do you feel about it?"

"Thrilled, Papa. I love him with all my heart. I do want to marry him and spend forever with him. I really do."

He studied his hands a second, blinking away the moistness in his eyes. "What are you fixin' to do if I say no?"

What would she do? Did she even know? She reached over and squeezed Buddy's hand. "I don't know." Her voice broke. "Not having you both would break my heart." Tears blurred her vision. She sniffed and swiped at her running nose. "Please don't make me choose. Give

us your blessing.”

Bless Nana’s heart, she handed her a hanky then patted Sandy and Buddy’s clasped hands.

Papa wiped his own eyes. “Tell you what. Sunday, one year from tomorrow, I’ll walk you down the aisle and give you to this man if he can prove he’s got some backbone, and that he isn’t a strutting peacock like the rest of them.”

“A whole year? Why not now? We love each other. Why do we have to wait?”

Buddy squeezed her hand. “It’ll be fine. Your dad’s right. I mean, we hardly know each other. A year’s not long. Think about it; give me time to build us a house. Soon as the carpenters are through working on the church, just show me where you want it.”

Her father extended his hand. Buddy grasped it and shook. She lost her breath like the time the cow kicked her in the belly. She wanted to scream.

A year?

That’d take forever! She wanted him right then, didn’t even want to wait a day, much less three hundred and sixty-five! Somewhere deep down though, she knew they were right. Still . . .

At least Papa didn’t say no. A miracle in itself. Maybe it really wasn’t too much to ask, and that way, she could have them both.

Her mother appeared in the door, wiping her hands on her apron. “Anybody hungry? We’ve got enough food in there to feed an army.”



Buddy laid his fork next to the half-eaten piece of pecan pie. All the well-wishers and extended family were long gone.

For the last ten minutes, he’d been taking little nibbles of his dessert so Mis’ess Harris or Nana wouldn’t force another piece on him. He couldn’t remember ever eating better. Or so much.

The community ladies had outdone themselves.

Travis scooted his chair back. “Well, folks, Em and I best get going.”

Mister John held two fingers in the air. “Now wait a minute. Why don’t y’all stay the night and go to church with us in the morning? We’ve got Em’s old room.”

Emma Lee looked at her grandmother. “Where would Nana stay? You’re not going home, are you, Nana?”

“Well, no. I thought I would stay over, but I can sleep fine on the couch. You newlyweds need your privacy.”

“Don’t be silly, Mother. You can sleep with Miranda, I’ll take the

couch.” Mister John belched then tapped his chest with his rolled fist. “Umm, good food. So, it’s settled then?”

Miranda stopped clearing the table. “Well, I think it’s a wonderful idea. There’s no need rushing off in the middle of the night, and we can have Sunday supper together tomorrow `fore y’all leave. Lord knows we’ve got plenty of food. Buddy, you’re coming aren’t you?”

He inhaled his last bite of pie, washed it down with a gulp of milk, then stood. “Yes, ma’am, but seein’ as how I don’t have the same invitation as Travis here, guess I best be gettin’ on home. Don’t want to be late for Sunday school in the morning.”

Fifteen minutes later after everyone went back in from walking him to the car, he and Sandy were finally alone. He hugged her.

“I can’t believe you shook his hand. Why did you agree to that? I want to get married now.”

“Well, baby, your daddy was right to a certain extent, but don’t be upset with me. I figure we can have it both ways.”

“What do you mean?”

He squeezed her tighter. “The Bible basically says when a man lies with a woman, she’s his wife. It doesn’t matter what men say. Then in a year’s time, your daddy can walk you down the aisle, and we’ll have a piece of paper that says what God already knows.”

She cocked her head and pursed her lips. “Are you sure it says that in the Bible? I never heard it in Sunday school.”

Buddy pecked her on the cheek, jumped in the Cadillac, then rolled down his window. “You look it up, then we’ll talk about it tomorrow after church.”

Sandy laughed then blew him a kiss. The Caddy’s engine revved to life. He backed slowly toward the barn then dropped her into gear. His lips formed the words ‘I love you’ before he eased into the lane.

Buddy watched her wave good-bye in his rearview mirror until the hedgerow thickened and he couldn’t see her anymore. Oh, mercy, he wanted that girl. He longed to see her exactly as God made her.

“What if she says no? You can’t go a whole year without a woman.”

The hairs on his neck stood out. Buddy slammed on the brakes, skidded to a stop, then wheeled toward the back seat.

The banker grinned at him. Buddy blinked and the apparition disappeared. He swallowed hard, his heart in his throat.

Mercy, his mind was playing tricks on him.

First he had dreamed about him, and now he was conjuring up images of that dumb ghost. He absentmindedly touched his ear. But he heard him, didn’t he?

He slipped the Caddy into first gear and eased off. What if she did say no? Doubt plagued him the rest of the way to Pine Bluff.



Sandy tapped on Emma Lee's bedroom door. Its hinges squeaked when she cracked it open and cautiously peeked in. "Lee Lee, you awake?"

The bed's smaller lump raised her red head. "What time is it?"
"Almost five."

She whispered, "Go ahead and start. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Sandy closed the door, then hurried downstairs and tiptoed through the living room. Her mother squatted in front of the stove, feeding kindling into the old cast iron fire box. Sandy grabbed Miranda's shoulders and pulled her up.

"Get your bath, Mama. We can take care of everything."

"You sure?"

"Hey, we've been fixing Sunday breakfast for years. Her being married shouldn't change anything."

Mama smiled and took off her apron. "Well, if you're sure."

" 'Course I am. You go ahead and get your bath." Sandy gave her a kiss and hug then had the fire going and the water halfway to boil before Emma came down.

For better than forty-five minutes, she worked getting everything going; Sandy covered a heaping plate of crisp bacon, slid the pan of biscuits into the oven, then grabbed herself a cup of coffee and sat down.

"Buddy told me something last night."

Emma faced Sandy, her hand still deftly stirring the gravy.
"What's that?"

"He said we could have it both ways."

Her sister stopped stirring. "Have what both ways?"

"He says the Bible says . . ." She paused and sipped her coffee.
"That when a man lays with a woman, then they're married."

Emma shook her head. "Don't do it, Sandy. Make him wait until you get married."

"But we would be married, according to God."

"Yeah, but not according to Papa."



Buddy also got up with the chickens. The rooster down the road saw to it, not that he minded. He had time for a bath. Standing under a dripping five-gallon bucket got you clean enough, but a hot tub of water was a thing to relish.

And if the old man held to form, Buddy wouldn't even have to face him. Early to the reverend was seven-thirty. Let him get someone else to lead the singing. Buddy gave his word to Mister John, not the Pine Bluff Holiness Church.

As he figured, his father was still sawing logs when Buddy slipped the Caddy into gear and rolled out of the church parking lot. The closer he got to Cypress Springs, the more the ghost's words ate at him.

What would he do if she said no? She wouldn't. She couldn't. She wanted him as much as he wanted her, and he hadn't ever wanted anyone as badly.

No matter how much he tried to convince himself she would be like every other female he'd set his cap for, the doubt kept gnawing away.

It nibbled on him while he filled the Caddy's gas tank at the Highway Seventy-One Café/combo gas station. What would he do if she said no?

He didn't know, and for the life of him couldn't figure it out. The part of him that didn't think all that much wanted a woman, any woman, but his heart only wanted Sandy.

The matter still wasn't resolved when he reached the school house. Buddy backed the Caddy into the two-story building's shade to wait. Being early was out, but at least knowing he'd have his answer soon settled him a little.

Before the lull evaporated, Travis' Chevrolet sedan rumbled into view. Buddy stomped the Cadillac to life. Sandy waved as she climbed out of the backseat.

Driving the two hundred yards slow and easy, Buddy gave Travis and Emma Lee plenty of time to get out and up to the church building then parked next to the Chevy. "Good morning, sweetheart."

Sandy opened his door. "Good morning, yourself," then pecked his cheek as he climbed out.

Buddy hugged her then leaned back. "You read your Bible last night?"

She nodded. "It's in there all right, just like you said, but Buddy —"

Nausea hit his stomach, and a band tightened around his chest. He smiled. She's just nervous. She wouldn't deny him.

"But? But what?"

Sandy looked up through those thick lashes. "You're the one who shook hands with Papa. I don't want to wait a year, but I don't think I want it both ways either."

Chapter Twenty



uddy plastered a smile on his face.

“Whatever you say, Sandy.”

“You’re mad at me now.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and walked her toward the arbor. “For twenty years, I haven’t had a home. Now that I’ve found one.” He squeezed her to him. “I’d like to be there.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You, Sandy. You’re my home, my place of refuge, and I desire only to be with you. I love you, long to make love with you, become one flesh.”

She blushed. “Oh, Buddy, I feel the same way, but I just can’t. What if Papa found out?”

“He wouldn’t.”

“What if I got pregnant?”

“I wouldn’t let that happen.”

Sandy stared off into the distance. “Well, I’ll think about it.” She looked toward the church building. “We better get to class. It’s about time.”

Buddy followed Sandy through the sanctuary to a small room next to the baptistery. It couldn’t have more than ten feet square, but more than a dozen warm young bodies crowded in. He and Sandy sat in the far corner with their thighs pressed together.

Concentration came hard.

“Who can tell me,” a middle-aged woman asked, “where Moses went when he fled Egypt?”

No one answered.

“Didn’t anyone read their lesson?”

Sandy nudged Buddy. He pulled his thoughts away from her soft flesh, replayed the question, then raised his hand.

“Yes, young man?”

“He’s Buddy Nightingale.” Sandy beamed. “My fiancée.”

“Well, congratulations, Sandra Louise. So, Buddy, can you tell us where Moses went?”

“To Midian.”

“That’s correct.” For the next twenty minutes the woman expounded on Moses’ sojourn in a foreign land. “Can anyone tell me why God tried to kill Moses on the way back to Egypt?” She looked around the room. No one raised their hand.

Sandy poked Buddy again. He fanned the air with a finger. “Because he hadn’t been obedient.”

“In what way?”

“He hadn’t circumcised his first born son, Gershom.”

“Right again. At least someone’s read the lesson.”

“Actually, I haven’t, but my father’s preached on Moses many a time. It’s one of his favorite subjects.”

“Preacher’s son, huh?” The teacher studied Buddy. “Now I remember where I heard that name. You’re the Buddy Nightingale, aren’t you?”

He laughed. “Well, my Mama named me Broderick, but everyone always called me Buddy. Guess there may be more than one, but if there is, I’ve never had the pleasure.”

“Well, I thought— What are you doing here?”

Buddy looked at Sandy. Her beauty snatched his breath. He grinned. “I told Mister John I’d join the Church of Christ so I could marry Sandy. Doesn’t matter to me where we worship the Lord, as long as we’re together.”

“Oh, how wonderful.” The lady glanced around the room. “Buddy, we’re all truly glad to have you. Now, can anyone other than a preacher’s son tell me why it was so important for Moses’ son to be circumcised?”

No one raised a hand.

“Buddy?”

“The children of Israel wouldn’t have accepted Moses.”

“Exactly.” She looked at her notes.

Sandy nudged her elbow in Buddy’s ribs and whispered. “Show-off.”

Buddy raised his hand. The woman looked up. “Yes, Buddy?”

“I’ve got a question for you.”

“Well, certainly. Uh, what is it?”

“What’s the saddest part of this whole lesson?”

She crossed her arms and wrinkled her brow. “Well, I’m not sure I know what you’re after, but now later on, Zipporah leaves Moses and returns to her father. Is that what you’re referring to?”

“No, ma’am, but that was sad, too.” He leaned forward with his elbows resting on his knees. “No, I was talking about when Moses first went to Midian, he went to the tent of Reuel. Later on, that same man is called Jethro.

“Now if you study the names in Hebrew, you know Reuel means ‘friend of God’ while Jethro means ‘large.’ ”

He caught the eyes of a mousy young girl and smiled. “Seemed real sad to me that Moses made his father-in-law so rich they changed his name from ‘friend of God’ to ‘large’.”

“I see what you’re talking about. I’d never considered that. How interesting.” A cow bell’s double clang sounded. “Oh my, is it time already?”

In unison, everyone stood.

“Y’all read next week’s lesson, and maybe someone besides Buddy can answer a question,” she admonished as the room emptied.

Sandy snuggled into Buddy’s chest. “You are a show-off.”

“Not really, but if I know something, I do enjoy sharing.”

While the men smoked and the women visited, Buddy and Sandy strolled the grounds. She squeezed his hand. “Do you really love me, Buddy?”

“With all my heart.”

Too soon everyone started drifting toward the church building. Sandy tugged on Buddy’s hand. “Come on, it’s starting.”

“Wouldn’t want to miss that, would we?” He hoped her response might be affirmative.

It’d be anything better than spending an unchaperoned hour together, but Buddy let her lead him into the sanctuary and up the outside aisle to a middle pew. Strange, not strolling right up front. He must have walked into at least a thousand different churches, and this was the first time he ever sat anywhere but on the platform or the front row.

The quiet hum died. A tall bean pole of a man rose and faced the crowd.

“Page one-eighty-three in your hymnals.” He swallowed hard then opened his mouth and sang. The man’s Adam’s apple rose and fell like a yo-yo as he belted out the words. His tone hurt Buddy’s ears. He squeezed Sandy’s hand and bit his cheek.

She stuck the hymnal in front of him. “Quit that and be good,” she whispered. “Sing.”

“Quit what?”

Sandy rolled her eyes then nodded toward the front. "Sing."

His love bid him, so sing he did, soft and on-key, with no hint of the nasal twang Bean Pole and half his congregation seemed to adore. Buddy heard a harmony, but forced himself to stay with the melody.

The music leader's hand energetically sliced the air in time to the beat. Up down, left, right. Up down, left, right. He skipped the two middle verses and ended it just as the congregation seemed to warm to the hymn.

Again he filled his lungs, then announced, "Love Lifted Me. Page three hundred and fifteen."

It amazed Buddy the guy's face stayed so deadpan, like he sang by rote, not at all from his heart. Sandy flipped the pages to the second song. The man hurried through that one, too. Buddy bit his lip.

What had he got himself into?

How could a sweet realization as 'When nothing else could help, love lifted me' be sung in such a hollow manner? The hymn ended, and Bean Pole took his place on the opposite front pew. From the other end, another man stood.

Sandy leaned over. "That's Brother Forester."

"The singing's over?"

"Mornin', folks." The preacher walked to the pulpit then opened his Bible.

After a slow start, he found a rhythm and preached a decent sermon. Buddy had heard worse. Forester motioned toward the back, and two men walked down the aisle carrying large silver trays.

Buddy leaned over. "Why didn't you tell me it was Communion Sunday?"

Sandy shrugged. "Didn't think to. We take the Lord's supper every Sunday."

"Oh." Buddy pondered a moment, going over the scriptures he remembered. 'As oft as you do it, do it in remembrance of me.' Well, guess there wasn't anything wrong with every Sunday.

The preacher asked a different member to pray before the bread and the grape juice. It ticked Buddy that no one used real wine. Jesus didn't pour juice.

Once the last communion tray was set down and covered, the ushers picked up two shallow wooden collection plates. Buddy dug in his suit pants for some folding money.

"Lord," Forester paused and swept the room with his eyes, "help us to remember that all we have belongs to You. We ask You to bless this offering in Jesus' name. Amen."

The men walked to the back and started the collection plates. Buddy hadn't ever been on the giving end before. Strange, in a nice sort of way. He dropped a five into the plate. Out of the corner of his

eye, he caught Sandy smiling. He resisted returning the gesture.

The men finished and returned the plates, now overflowing with dollar bills, to the communion table. Bean Pole stood, walked next to the preacher, and opened his hymnal again.

Forester gripped the pulpit's edges. "Before we close with a song, I want to invite anyone that needs to make any kind of public profession to come on down front while we sing."

Their music man motioned everyone to stand, and the small congregation complied. "Turn to 'Softly and Tenderly,' page fifty-six."

Motion from the far side of the sanctuary pulled Buddy's head around. A young man of twelve or thirteen walked down the outside aisle. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

The preacher met him at the front and wrapped his arm around the boy's shoulder. He listened for a moment then led the boy over to the front pew.

Bean Pole finished the first verse and went right into the second with no chorus. Before the song finished, Forester joined him.

"Bless the Lord, folks. Jim Bob comes forward professing his faith in Jesus and wishes to be baptized."

Almost in unison, heads across the room nodded agreement. Forester and the boy walked toward the Sunday school room on the right.

Sandy leaned over and whispered. "The girls use the room on the left."

He'd heard the Church of Christ didn't waste any time dunking, but he didn't see anything wrong with that. Not that waiting bothered him either. He couldn't help but shake his head when the song leader rose again.

Bean Pole flipped through his hymnal. "Page two-o-two. 'Up From the Grave.' "

With the same nasal twang, he raced through the first verse, then skipped the chorus. Why did he keep doing that? Buddy didn't know the song, but he liked it. Halfway through the second verse, he released the harmony in his mind's ear.

The hair on the back of his neck tingled. They reached the chorus. Sopranos and tenors strained their voices to hit and hold the high notes. "He arose. He arose."

Buddy jumped up on the pew, one foot resting on the top edge, and threw his fist into the air. "Hallelujah."

His hallelujah echoed then died amidst total silence. Everyone stared. He stared back only a second.

"What's the matter with you, folks? We've got a little brother that's just committed his life to the Lord, and you all are sitting there like nothing happened."

The silence deepened. Buddy's heart ached for these people.

"Don't you hear the words you're singing? He arose. Jesus was dead and buried, but He arose. The grave couldn't hold him." He scanned the crowd, a few nodded. There were a couple of nervous smiles, but . . .

Most just stared as though he were a rabid dog.

The lights flicked off just as a recessed bulb in the baptistery came on, and Buddy sat back down. Forester and the boy stood chest deep in the water.

"Son, you're absolutely right. The grave couldn't hold our Savior." He faced Jimmy. "Little Brother, because of your profession of faith, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost."

Buddy climbed down.

Sandy squeezed his hand. "I love you, Buddy."

"I know you do, baby."

Chapter Twenty-one



andy looked over her shoulder.

Nothing. She returned to the soapy water.

Only thing left was the silverware. She sure hoped her father was being civil. Only Nana and Buddy could be seen through the sitting room window.

From the moment they'd returned from church, Nana had kept Papa at bay. Bless her heart. But it was coming. A thing might be put off a while, but with John Harris, it was never forgotten or swept under the rug. Sooner or later, Buddy would have to talk to him.

She dropped the last fork in the rinse and tried not to smile. "That's it, Lee Lee, the one we've been looking for."

She teased right back. "Oh, look. It's the long lost, last one. Can't you think of anything new?" She wrapped her dish towel around the fork and rubbed.

Peeking around the corner through the screen, Sandy checked on Buddy and Nana again—they were still sitting on the porch—then dried her hands on her sister's dish towel. "Oh, I can hardly think at all right now. What am I going do? He'll never be happy in the Church of Christ."

"You don't know that. Jacob worked seven years for Rachel. You're worth at least fifty-one more Sundays."

No matter how much she wanted to, it was so hard to believe. She could never have ever imagined. "He says he loves me, but do you think he really does? I mean, he's so handsome. And famous, too. You think he could really be serious?"

"Not for me to say. That's only something you can answer."

That was no help.

"Gracious, Lee Lee, if he loves me only half as much as I love him, I'd be the happiest girl in the world." Sandy sighed and wished she knew, as well as she knew her family loved her and always would, no matter what she did.

Just like Papa. He got over her sister running off. The whole thing with Buddy might seem so sudden, but look at Travis and Emma Lee. And they were doing so well together.

Oh, she'd never wanted anything as much as she wanted to be Mis'ess Nightingale.

Pulling a sash, Lee Lee untied her apron and laid it over a chair. "Come on, let's go drag Nana away from Buddy. You know Papa's going to have his say."

She let her sister pull her toward the porch. Halfway through the sitting room, she stopped. "Wait."

"For what?"

"I want to get something." Sandy trotted back to the kitchen and grabbed two spoons.

"You're a genius."

"Not really, just desperate." She pushed open the screen door. "Where's Papa?"

Her grandmother looked over her shoulder. "Him and Travis were out by the barn a while ago, but I haven't seen them for a spell."

Stepping around, Lee Lee and sat in the swing. "What were they doing?"

An empty chair sat across from Buddy, he whirled it then pulled it next to his then patted the seat. "I think talking. Heard Travis tell your father he needed to speak with him."

Sandy tucked her skirt and eased into the offered place as if she didn't have a care in the world. "So what have you and Nana been talking about all this time?"

"Your grandmother's been filling me in on your childhood." He patted her leg, and his touch made such wonderful things happen inside. Her skin came so alive with him. She tingled all over and inside, too.

The spoons slipped out of her hand and clanged to the floor.

"What was that?"

Retrieving the silverware, she held them up. "Oh, I was hoping Nana could get Papa to play."

He took the spoons then turned them back to back. "Mister John plays?"

"Oh yes, he used to. A lot, but here lately Nana's about the only one who can get him to."

Buddy popped the spoons against his leg double time. "Oh, when

the saints—” Then he rapped them against the palm of his left hand. “Go marching in. When the saints go marching in.”

The silvery jangle put Sandy’s feet to tapping, and she joined in the chorus, harmonizing. “Lord, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.” Buddy laughed then dropped the spoons into her lap.

“Why’d you quit?”

“I can’t play them, not really.”

To the left, movement caught her eye. Papa and Travis walked toward the porch, looking like the best of friends. “Well, lookie there. Papa’s smiling so hard his cheeks are about to split.”

With a little soft chuckle, Lee Lee whispered, “Travis must have told him.”

Before Sandy could ask what, her father and brother-in-law came within earshot. “So what are you grinning about?”

Her father walked to the steps. “Travis here told me some good news.” He stared at his youngest for a second then nodded. “Yes, sir. I’d be mighty proud for my first grandson to carry my name.”

“I thought you would, but figured we’d better ask. You being so ornery and all.”

Smiles ruled the afternoon.

“And what if he’s a she?” Nana giggled. “Alta is a fine name for a girl.”

“Or Sandra Louise.”

“We haven’t decided yet.”

Her brother-in-law stepped past Papa and pulled Lee Lee to her feet. “Come on, babe. We’ve got a long drive ahead.”

It took them better than thirty minutes to say their goodbyes. Sandy and Buddy stood in the road and waved as they disappeared down the road. She hated to see them go, but had to agree that Travis was heaven sent. Never could newlyweds be more in love.

Strong fingers wrapped hers like one of Nana’s quilts. He squeezed. “Want to run into Marble?”

Her parents stood on the porch. “No, I think Papa probably wants to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“Church.” She looked into his eyes. “I’m pretty sure he thinks you were a little out of line this morning.”

Mama had gone back in, but he had taken his usual seat at the far end.

“He does?” Buddy released her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulder, walking toward his future father-in-law. “What did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything. It was how he looked. If Nana hadn’t run

interference all afternoon, he'd have already cornered you for sure."

Stopping at the steps, he eased Sandy forward. "How about some tea, baby?"

"Sure. You want some, Papa?"



Relieved, Buddy sat on the porch, his angel sagely away, and faced Mister John, as stern as ever. If only the man could spare a smile. "Sandy seems to think you want to talk with me, sir."

"I do." He leaned forward. "If you're going to join my church, you've got to understand how we do things."

The toes of his shoes looked scuffed compared. How could he say it without offending Sandy's father? Mister John pulled out the fixings then tried to pass the sack of Bull Durham.

"No thanks." Buddy shook his head and looked him in the eye. "I hear where you're coming from, sir, but it ain't your church, it's the Lord's, right?"

Mister John's lips thinned. The hardness in the man's eyes pressed Buddy's back against his chair.

"You're right. It is the Lord's church, but He is not here, so we make the rules. You ever embarrass me again like this morning, not only will you not marry my daughter, you'll never see her again."

His beloved appeared in the doorway, holding two glasses of tea.

The words he wanted to say caught in his throat. He stood, swallowed hard, then opened the door for Sandy. "Yes, sir." She handed him a glass. "And I'm sorry you were embarrassed."

An awkward silence followed. Buddy's heartbeat slowed, and the pride he'd swallowed worked its way back up. He would love nothing better than to debate religion with Mister John, but not with his angel as the prize.

Never could he chance losing her for he could never live without her.

The sound of tires crushing gravel pulled Buddy's head around. A '32 Ford sedan eased down the lane. Mister John stepped off the far end of the porch and walked to where it came to a stop.

"It's the preacher. I wonder what he wants?" Sandy walked to the steps. "Hey, Brother Forester." She waved.

He waved back then walked toward the house with his arm draped over Mister John's shoulder. "Hey yourself, Sandra Louise. Buddy here?"

He stood. Looked like John Harris wasn't the only one embarrassed. "Yes, sir. Right here. What can I do for you?"

The minister faced Buddy. "Clyde's had to go to Austin for a time. His mama took sick."

"Sorry to hear that." Buddy stuffed his hands deep in his pockets. Who was Clyde?

"I was wondering if you'd lead the singing for a while. Not sure how long he'll be gone."

Buddy looked to Mister John. His expression didn't change. The screen door flew open. Nana charged past him and Sandy to the edge of the porch.

"Why, he'd love to." Nana looked back over her shoulder. "Wouldn't you, son?"

Of course he would. He'd do anything the sweet little old lady asked. "Yes, ma'am." He turned. "I'd be proud to help out, sir. When do you want me there, and what songs should we sing?"

"Prayer meeting's at six. Guess any song in the book would be fine."

"I'll be there."

Forester nodded then shook Mister John's hand. "Well good. That's settled. I've still got two more shut-ins to visit, so best be going. See y'all this evening."

So that's how Buddy came to lead the singing at Cypress Springs Church of Christ. Like Forester instructed, he sang from the songbook. Not in the nasal twang Clyde the bean pole loved, but his own crystal clear, velvet tenor.

Four weeks straight, he eased the little congregation into singing the hymns as meant. Sandy was ecstatic that her fantasy became reality. Everything was right and as it should be. That is . . . until the Fourth of July picnic.

Chapter Twenty-two



y the first of July, still nothing was settled.

The little community of Cypress Springs had divided itself right down the middle when it came to Buddy Nightingale leading the singing at the Church of Christ.

Even the Baptists expressed an opinion. While Nana made no bones about what she thought, John Harris held his tongue. He'd shaken hands with Buddy and given his word.

About the only other topic of conversation was the heat.

That sweltering, thick, take-your-breath-away blast furnace that settles annually over the Texas Hill Country had arrived early. Nana and Miranda kept damp towels hanging around their necks and all the fans on high.

But nothing could save one from it.

One only suffered through, and suffer Sandy did. She'd moved her bed to the screened-in porch, but even that didn't help much. From early morning on the third of July, Sandy and her mother kept the stove blazing.

By the morning of the Fourth, pounds of food, cooked and seasoned was packed away in boxes ready for the picnic.

Way past ready, Sandy stood at her mirror and ran the comb through her hair. The Ford's horn sounded again. She tossed the brush on her dresser. Papa would leave her for sure after four blasts, then she'd have to walk.

On more than one occasion, he'd left her. After a last glance, she

ran downstairs. Walking the five miles to Cypress Springs school house wouldn't do a thing for helping her look her best, not in that infernal heat.

Besides, that trip was all too familiar after walking it countless times between the first and eighth grades. From the porch, she did a quick survey of the front yard and wished she had a camera.

Her grandmother and Mama waited dripping in the Ford while Papa loaded the boxes of food in the boot. Her first Fourth of July with Buddy would be special, and she wanted to remember it carefully. She lingered a moment longer.

"You coming?" He closed the boot. "Or do I need to honk the horn again?"

She skipped down the porch steps. "Oh, Papa. You know I wouldn't miss this picnic."

The Ford rounded the last curve, and the old school building, in need of a coat of red paint, came into view. It sat at one end of the ten-acre property, and the church at the other. The arbor split the middle.

That's what everybody called it, but it wasn't any more than a tin roof supported by cedar poles stuck in a slab of concrete. Beneath the tin, one row of picnic tables spread with white sheets sat already brimming with food.

Several men encircled a big rock barbecue grill that rested off to the side nearest the school. The luring aroma of grilled meat filled the air. She'd seen it all a million times, but today it looked different somehow.

Scanning the cars and trucks scattered about, her heart dropped. No sign of Buddy's Caddy. But then, it was still early.

"Here, girl. Make yourself useful."

"Sure, Papa." She grabbed the box he hefted toward her then walked toward the arbor.

Buddy strolled up in time to join her before the blessing. He intertwined his fingers with hers as her father bowed his head to bless the food.

The honor of opening the picnic with a prayer fell to him every year—being the oldest son of Jacob Harris, the oldest son of Julius Caesar Harris who donated the parcel of land to the community almost seventy years prior.

Of course, nobody ever mentioned that Jules Harris won the land in a card game, seeing how the true church folks didn't hold to card playing. Sandy often wondered who would do it after Papa.

"Amen." Mister John looked up. "Let's eat."

Hurrying to the arbor, she busied herself serving until Buddy finished going down the line, then grabbed a plate herself.

“Let’s eat under the big oak.”

A mammoth tree guarded the rear corner of the church building. She nodded toward it. He held her hand for support while she settled against the tree’s trunk then sat cross-legged in front of her.

Halfway through dinner, Sandy looked toward the adults. Papa had settled under the elm that shaded the barbecue with a group that included Nathaniel Nightingale, and her mother—with her back to Sandy—in a circle of folding chairs next to the food-laden tables.

A dozen or so kids played baseball next to the school, but no one was around or seemed to have an eye on her and her beau. Anticipation for the day had a well-practiced speech all ready for the first time they would be alone.

“On the far side of the church.” Her heart beat faster, but she continued, “there’s a storeroom.”

“Oh yes?”

Nodding, she lowered her eyes. The beating in her chest thundered like the voice of God. Her skirt became an apron on which to dry sweaty palms.

Her beau smiled. “I’ve a fondness for storerooms. Shall we take us a look at this one, my love?”

Her heart flipped over then beat even faster. She set her plate down and stood. Real slow—and hoping she didn’t have guilt plastered on her face—she surveyed the crowd again. No one took notice.

She backed away a step then another.

He grinned and looked better than Clark Gable or any other movie star she’d ever seen. He scanned the picnic scene. “No one’s watching.”

“Shhh.” She turned, scurried around the corner of the building, then peeked back around. He blew her a kiss and she gave him a smile then checked on her parents—both engrossed in their conversations.

Sucking in a deep breath, she exhaled slowly and walked backwards. Buddy rounded the corner and pulled her to his chest and gave her a quick, but ever so passionate kiss. He had wonderful lips, she loved them.

A quivering warmth spread inside.

Images of an adorable little white cottage with lots of big shade trees sprang before her. Flowers bloomed everywhere gracing a green, green lawn. Big puffy clouds floated above in the perfect blue sky.

Babies, plenty of babies, played in the yard. There, in her fantasy porch swing, sat Buddy. She swept out of the screen door with a pitcher of lemonade and served her man. Oh, she would definitely live happily ever after.

He nuzzled her neck. “Baby, I need you so much.”

She opened her eyes.

He winked then pushed her toward the door. "You were going to show me the storeroom?"

From absorbing the July sunrays, the metal door handle almost burned her, but she grabbed it and pulled. "Come on." Her hand batted the air for the light string. Buddy closed the door.

A nightmarish darkness enveloped the room. Her heart jumped to her throat. Her fingers touched the string, snatched ahold, and yanked. The desire to bolt almost overpowered her. She shouldn't be here fixing to do this.

His delicious lips kissed her again, but that time it proved anything but quick. The desire to run vanished as Sandy melted in his embrace. She belonged to him.

"Oh, Buddy." She pressed herself hard against him. His lips explored her face, kissed her eyelids. Her insides must be akin to Nana's preserves. A warmth swept downward. He hugged her tighter.

Panic surged through her, froze her in place. Buddy found her lips again, then gathered some of her skirt. She couldn't tear herself away. Intimacy before marriage had never even been an option. She surely wanted to wait.

But every part of her seemed so alive. He gathered more skirt. His hand touched her bare skin. An electricity raced through her.

"Oh, Buddy." Sandy put her hand over his. "You've got to stop."

"I can't help it, baby. I want you more than my next breath."

Holding her firmly against him with one hand on her thigh, he traced a finger down her neck to the lace-edge of her bodice and slipped a finger under.

"No, Buddy. Not here." She pushed away, grabbing for the doorknob. "Not now."

"Then when? We're never alone."

Dizzy from lust, she couldn't think of what to say. Her skin radiated heat. Suddenly, the room was stifling. She straightened her skirt then shook her hands. "I don't know. I don't know."

His blue eyes were so big and so sad, like a just-weaned pup dog. She hated doing this to him. Heck, she hated doing it to herself. "Tomorrow I'm helping Aunt Iva shell some peas. Old man Rogers died last winter." She paused, not sure she wanted to continue.

"And?"

Oh, he was so handsome, and those eyes . . .

"His barn's right off the road." She leaned in, kissing him quick before he could grab her. "It's abandoned. Meet me at the barn. About five." He smiled. She kissed him one last time then dashed out.

That night on the porch, she could hardly sleep. Twice she came close to getting up and writing Emma Lee, but she didn't need to

write, she needed her here to talk, not that she truly wanted to hear her sister's or anyone else's advice.

All those lessons the preacher and her Sunday school teachers ever taught couldn't make what was in her heart go away. They'd only drown her in guilt for even thinking about doing what she wanted so badly.

While Sandy stared through the screen at the moon, she considered not even showing up, then finally decided to meet him, but only to talk. No kissing or anything else. Just talking. No harm could come from talking.

A little before noon the next day, Sandy walked the three miles to her old maid aunt's house. Fifteen fresh-picked bushels of cow peas waited on the front porch. While she and Aunt Iva shelled, the old woman talked.

For hours, instead of showing her usual polite interest, Sandy had trouble keeping up with the conversation. The elderly woman droned on and on about people and places that held not one licking bit of concern to Sandy.

Especially not on that day.

Under normal circumstances, maybe, but not today. Hard as she tried, Sandy couldn't keep her thoughts off Buddy long enough for Aunt Iva to even finish a sentence. Finally, the old woman caught her breath.

"Aunt Iva, I'm sorry, but I'm gonna have to go. I promised Mama I'd be home early this week." Sandy hated lying, but if she didn't get out of there soon, she'd bust for sure.

The old woman patted her hand. "Tell him hey for me, child."

Sandy cocked her head and stared at her great aunt. "Tell who hey, Auntie?"

"Why, Buddy, of course. Unless someone else has been sparking you." Aunt Iva winked.

Her face suddenly became so hot. How could she know? "Oh, you mean next Sunday? Sure, I'll tell Buddy you said hey." She hoped she sounded convincing, but knew it must sound like the biggest dodge in the history of human kind.

Lifting her skirt, she emptied her peas into her aunt's bowl then leaned down and kissed her wrinkled cheek. "Bye, Aunt Iva."

"Go on, then. I won't say a word. I was young once myself, you know."

Sandy backed down the porch's steps grinning ear to ear. She loved Aunt Iva and was grateful to have an adult who understood, even if she couldn't really know. If she did, the old dear would probably hog tie her.

She waved then turned and trotted toward the Rogers' place.

Slowing when the barn came into view, she hoped she didn't smell like a field hand. Could she go through with it?

The skin on the base of her neck tingled while chills raced up and down her back. Intuition told her to run home as fast as her legs would carry her. Brother Forester's voice echoed in her mind.

'Flee temptation and all manners of ungodliness. Keep yourself pure and holy in the sight of the Lord.'

"But I'm not going to do anything wrong," she promised herself aloud then stuck one foot inside the deserted barn. She hesitated a fleeting few seconds, heart pounding, then plunged into the shadows. Sandy froze, letting her eyes adjust.

Images focused, and she searched the near empty structure.

"Buddy?" She took a couple of tentative steps. "Buddy, you here?"

"Sandy." He stepped from a back stall. "Down here."

In spite of herself, she ran to him. He stepped toward her and spread his arms. She threw herself into his embrace, knocking him momentarily off balance. Her mouth searched for his.

He kissed her then put his hands around her waist and slowly twirled her a half-circle. Sweeping her hair to one side, he blew softly in her ear then moved his lips along the back of her neck. Sandy leaned her head forward.

Her heart raced, and she shivered, tingling head to toe.

Buddy hugged her backside against himself and tenderly kissed her other ear. Her insides might fall out any minute, or explode, or something. One thing seemed certain. She was about to die and go to heaven if this got any better.

Reaching up, she moved his hand, turning toward him as she did.

His finger spiraled south. A handful of skirt inched north.

Sandy moved onto her side and straightened the fabric, swatting his hand away. "No, Buddy. We can't. I came to talk."

He rolled onto his back and tucked both hands under his neck. The color of his thick, wavy hair blended well with the hay, and his sky-blue eyes took her breath away. He couldn't be any better looking.

One boot raised to rest against the aged boards. He sighed. "I'm sorry. I am, but I can't help myself." He turned his head toward her. "I've never wanted anybody the way I want you." His eyes held hers.

Oh, how she lost herself in his piercing gaze. "Dear Buddy, don't you know I want you, too? But I can't do it. I just can't. It isn't right." She knew her words rang hollow.

He traced his finger over the pattern on her skirt, barely avoiding delicate areas. It tickled so good. She wanted him to stop, but she didn't want him to stop.

After all, he wasn't touching anything now that he shouldn't, and she had declared her resolve.

"I love you, Sandy."

The warm tingling that had momentarily abated returned ten fold. Butterflies swarmed her stomach. She closed her eyes. How can something that feels so good be so bad?

"Darlin', you're driving me crazy."

Without objection, she turned her head, squinted her eyes tight, and tried to relax. He'd said what she wanted to hear. Despite all her best intentions, she was fixing to let him do exactly what she knew he shouldn't.

"I love you, baby."

The barn door squeaked. Sandy's eyes opened. A shaft of sunlight flooded the dusty old building. A rat darted across the rafters, sending down a shower of tiny particles that danced in the beam. Buddy jumped to his feet.

"Sandra Louise Harris." Panic gripped her.

Papa!

Her love worked furiously to straighten his clothes.

"Come on out, girl. I know you're in here."

Buddy jiggled Sandy's shoulder, but panic held her prisoner. She couldn't move.

"You hear me? Show yourself."

He tugged Sandy's shirt straight, stood, and stepped out of the stall. "Mister Harris. . . Uh. . . Sandy's not here."

Sandy backed to the corner sank down, pulling her knees to her chin.

"Who's with you then? Step aside, boy."

"No, sir. I can't do that."

A groan followed a muffled thud. Buddy stumbled backwards past the stall's opening. Terror finally released its grip, and she made it to her feet.

Swiping at the hay caught in her hair, she screamed, "Stop it, Papa!"

Her father froze, standing gape mouthed. His arms hung at his sides. "Sandra Louise, how could you?" The betrayed look in his eyes almost broke her heart.

Buddy stepped in front of him. "It's not what you think, Mister Harris. We love each other."

In slow motion, her Papa moved his right hand across his stomach to his left hip and dipped his shoulder. He grunted as he brought the back of his hand swiftly across Buddy's mouth. She'd never seen her father's eyes so full of anger and hate.

Poor Buddy reeled backwards. Blood oozed from his split lip. He righted himself, lowered his shoulder, and charged. Papa side-stepped and stuck out his size twelve boot. Her love tripped, landing on his

face.

“Stop it! Don't hurt him!” Sandy ran toward her love.

But her father caught her wrist and swung her around. He dragged her several steps then shoved her toward the barn's door. Following after her, he gave her another push every time she stopped or turned to look at Buddy.

“Get yourself home, Sandra Louise. Take the Ford.”

“No, Papa. Don't make me go.” Tears wet her eyes. “You don't understand. I love Buddy. And he loves me.”

“Go on home, girl. Buddy and I have some business to tend to.”

Chapter Twenty-three



is lip hurt something awful.

He knocked the dust off his slacks, watching her walk away toward her father's car. She waved then got in, slammed the door, then stuck her head out the window. Tears streamed down her face.

"I love you, Buddy."

He mouthed the words 'I love you, too' as she backed the Ford onto the road. The pain and sorrow in her eyes cut his heart. Why had he done it? Why couldn't he have waited?

The Ford disappeared, leaving a cloud of dust. Its tires crushing gravel faded. John Harris stepped inside. Rays of the hot afternoon sun haloed him. In the shadow of it, Buddy couldn't read his eyes.

"We're married now. In God's eyes. Why won't you let us walk the aisle?" He stepped to the side and deeper into the shade. He couldn't run, not like the other times. Sandy belonged to him now, and he wouldn't leave without her.

"No. My daughter is not your wife." Mister John balled his fist. Rage boiled in the man's eyes.

"I love her, Mister Harris, and she loves me."

He stepped closer, his lips set like stone. For each forward step the man took, Buddy took one backwards. He banged into a support pole. Harris lunged forward, his right fist flying through the air.

A flash of meaty knuckles filled his vision. A sickening thud followed. Then searing pain sent him to the dirt. Aware of shapes and shadows, yet divorced from reason or caring, he moved not a muscle.

The throbbing in his jaw and back of his head bellowed, but he rode on top of it. Then that split second of semi-reason faded. He

closed his eyes, engulfed by a thick black fog.



Weeping uncontrollably, Sandy skidded the car to a stop just short of the picket fence in front of the house. “Mama!” She jumped out and ran, heart in her throat. “Mama, help me! Papa’s going to kill Buddy!”

The screen door flew open. Her mother wiped her hands on a dishtowel, her face screwed into a question. “What are you screaming about Sandra Louise?”

“Papa! He caught Buddy and me in old man Roger’s barn. I’ve never seen him so mad. Get in! Get in the car! We’ve got to get back there! He’s going to kill him!”

“Oh, no.” Her mother jerked off her apron. “You get inside. You’re not going anywhere.”

Shock froze the flow of tears. She only came home to get help, not stay. Her place was beside Buddy, to make sure Papa didn’t hurt him. “No. I’m coming with you.”

The panic in her mother’s eyes jolted her. Maybe she knew something Sandy didn’t. She grabbed her arm and shoved her toward the house. “You being there’ll only make things worse. Now do as I say! Get in the house!”

Mama knew best.

A wave of nausea crashed over Sandy, and the pounding in her head made her dizzy. She never should have set up the meeting. Everything . . . all her fault . . . what had she done?

Holding her head with both hands, she stumbled toward the house sobbing. “Oh Lord! God, please don’t let anything bad happen to him.”



The foggy soup in Buddy’s head thinned then released its grip. His eyelids split enough that shapes and shadows crept through. A hulk of figure walked in and out of his field of vision.

The man looked familiar, though Buddy couldn’t put a name to him. He lifted his head, but nausea dropped him back to the dirt. His knees drew to his stomach. Bile rose into his throat. He choked back.

Like a blindside snowball to the temple, it all came back. Sandy! Her father had hit him. He pushed himself to a sitting position and leaned against the post. Where was she? Oh, yes . . . drove off.

The man grabbed his arm and jerked him to his feet. “You worthless scum. I told her you were nothing but a strutting peacock.” The man flipped a noose around his neck.

Buddy’s hand flew to his throat. “What? What are you doing?”

The nausea vanished, replaced by a knot of fear.

"I aim to hang you." He tossed the other end of the rope across a beam then pulled.

The noose tightened. Harris leaned against the rope, lifting Buddy off the ground. His toes dangled inches above the dirt floor. He tugged at his noose "You're . . . crazy, old man!" He managed a raspy whisper. "Let me down!"

Harris held what he had with one hand then grabbed over his head and pulled. Buddy shot up another six inches. The rope cut into his fingers and the part of his neck he couldn't protect.

"Please! For God's sake! Let me . . . down!"

Movement caught his eye. He tore his gaze away from Harris. Miranda ran toward her husband. "No! John! Let him down this instant! She reached him and shook his trunk. Let him go! You don't want to do this."

"No. He's going to die for what he did."

"Then do you plan to hang Sandy, too?"

"Wasn't her fault."

"Yes, John. It's just as much her fault as his. They're just young . . . and in love. Think back, husband, to when you were young. They made a mistake. Let. Him. Down."

The fire died in Harris' eyes, and he relaxed his grip. Buddy fell to the ground, loosened the noose, and pulled it over his head. Precious fresh air filled his lungs in great gulps. The burns around his neck and backs of his hand stung.

Slowly, he rose, bracing himself against the post.

Harris pointed his fat, scarred finger right at Buddy's nose. "Boy, you've got till the sun comes up to be out of Burnet County, or I'll finish what I started."

He stared at the man. He loved Sandy, he did, but was she worth dying for? He tore his eyes away.

"Yes, sir."

The whisper echoed through his soul like a clap of thunder. He couldn't leave without Sandy. How would he live without her?

Slipping her arm around her husband, Miranda guided him out of the barn.

His hand went to his throat, gently touching the burns. He'd walked through the valley of the shadow of death.

That old man was crazy, but he'd show him yet. His angel belonged to him no matter what the old geezer said. Sandy was his. He knew it in his heart. John Harris couldn't live forever.

Walking into the dying sunlight, he suddenly turned and trotted back to their stall. She was his wife and nothing would change that. He'd had her first. His eyes searched the scene, seizing every

remembrance of his beloved.

Sated, he drove to Pine Bluff, gathered his clothes, and retrieved his cash. As he was leaving, he snatched his father's appointment book. The reverend no longer had need of it, and Buddy had to make a living while he waited.

One day soon, he'd come back.

And get Sandy.

In the cover of darkness, he threw his belongings in the Caddy's back seat and slipped out with no goodbyes. He couldn't stand having to relive the why of his hasty escape. In his mind, he'd done nothing wrong.

In his heart, he knew the truth.

The county road that ran by the Harris place beckoned him. Maybe Sandy would be out waiting. But she wasn't.

Slowing as he passed, he memorized every detail, freezing in his mind where his beloved remained caged until he could free her from that monster's grip.

Late into the night he crept along the back roads wondering what to do. He hated leaving without Sandy, but couldn't face her father. Sometime after midnight, he ran into Highway Seventy.

On and on he drove into the early morning night with no destination. The Caddy ate the road's little white strips like candy canes. Though his heart knew it wrong to leave without her, he convinced himself.

John Harris shouldered the blame—all of it.

If only he'd agreed to let them get married, everything would be fine. Or if . . . Buddy stopped himself. The hairs on the back of his neck stood out. A chill swept over him.

"If nothing."

He glanced over.

The dead banker sat in the front seat. "You should've killed 'em all."

"No, I'm not killing anyone."

The ghost laughed. "Yes, you are. You're killing yourself. And Sandy. Slaughtering the love you two had, dooming you both to a slow and torturous demise. Nothing worse than living with a broken heart."

"I'll go back and get her."

"Best to end it all now. Go back, yeah. Three bullets to their heads, then one for you. Nice and clean."

"Look, just because you didn't want to live, doesn't mean I don't." Buddy stared at the apparition. "Get out of here and leave me be. I'm not killing anyone."

The ghost laughed again, that time more a hideous cackle. "Then

you'll have to die." He lunged toward the steering wheel. The Caddy cut across the highway and bounced into the bar ditch, careening down its steep embankment.

Fighting the wheel for control, he got it headed back toward the road. The left front tire hit the gravel shoulder, held for a split second then slid off.

He jerked the wheel hard and stomped on the gas pedal. The front of the Caddy leapt up then went airborne. For a harrowing moment, the car balanced on its two right wheels then flipped and rolled.

Struggling for balance, he finally braced a foot against the passenger door. Landing on its hood, the Cadillac came to a sudden stop against a fence post.

A few creaks and settling groans continued after it rested, then a perfect silence ensued. Even the crickets hushed their singing. He found the door handle above his head and crawled out.

The smell of gasoline kept him crawling up toward the road. Head pounding, he took a quick inventory. Bruised and battered, but in reality, unhurt. He looked back.

The Caddy was a mangled mess. Oh, dear God. He stared at her a second, then stood. His knees wobbled, but he steadied himself and stepped toward what once was his pride and joy. Through the broken back window, he retrieved his bags.

Everything had turned sour. Was that what awaited him in this life? All his dreams dashed to mangled messes like the Caddy?

Searching for the appointment book, a hissing noise drew his attention. A tongue of fire licked the front grill. He hurled his bags away from the wreckage and ran for the road. There it was! Thrown during the rolling.

His foot slipped on the gravel shoulder. He fell and rolled as the Caddy exploded. Flames engulfed her. Shielding his face, he scooted toward his bags.

What else could go wrong?

He contemplated his fate, walking down the highway. His destination didn't seem important. Buddy had to get away, start his life over. At dawn's first light, a car approached. He stuck out his thumb.

The driver pulled onto the shoulder ahead and stopped. "Need a ride?"

"Yes, sir. I'd be much obliged." He trotted around the front, opened the rear door, and hefted his bags into the rumble seat.

The man smiled. "How far you going?"

Buddy slid in the passenger's side. "Guess as far as you'll take me."

Chapter Twenty-four



While Buddy hid himself out of Burnett County, Sandy shut herself in her room and cried.

Deep racking sobs softened to whimpers only to explode again into fresh wails. She wept for Buddy and her ruined life. ‘If only’ rang through her soul like the bong of Nana’s prized grandfather clock.

If only Papa hadn’t been so pigheaded, everything would have been fine. She and Buddy weren’t to blame, it was all her father’s fault.

For hours on end, she heaped hate upon hate toward John Harris. The little Papa’s girl who lived in her heart objected, but Sandy refused to listen to a word of her defense for him. She hated him!

A woman now, she didn’t need any old farmer telling her what to do. The stubborn fool didn’t know anything. He needed to be taught a lesson. And she was just the one to do it!

The more she toyed with revenge the less she cried. She’d fix him good, make him wish he’d never interfered with true love. If only Buddy had stood up to him.

Certainly could have beat some sense into him, but that wasn’t Broderick Eversole Nightingale’s style. He was a man of God, not some ruffian. Oh, how she loved him. She clutched her belly.

Maybe he had started a baby. No, he said he wouldn’t let that happen. Tears flowed again. “Oh Lord, bring him back to me.” Over and over, she prayed as her tears wet her pillow.

For the next two days she moped around the house, speaking when only spoken to then used only as few words as possible. She got her chores done, pecked at her food, and mostly plotted against her

father.

Several times, her mother tried to console her, but Sandy wouldn't have it. Her life was ruined. Until safe in Buddy's arms again, it couldn't be fixed.

The third morning after the worst day of her life started like any other Sunday morning. She shoed Mama off to her bath and got breakfast going. Sure missed having Emma Lee under foot.

The sameness of cooking on Sunday morning brought a little comfort, and the prospect of getting out of the house lifted her spirits. She smiled. Who knew? Buddy might be there. Surely Papa wouldn't raise a fuss in church.

Once she finally took her seat at the table, she avoided her father's eye. Still hadn't figured out exactly how she would avenge herself, but it was coming, and just knowing made things better.

He scooted his chair back, placed his napkin on top of his plate, then stood. "Sandra Louise."

"What?"

"This morning I expect you to confess your sins before the church and rededicate your life to Christ."

Her heart stopped then thundered against her chest. "You can't mean that."

"I mean it all right, girl. I will not harbor a fornicator."

Her mother put down her fork. "John."

Sandy jumped to her feet and glared. "Buddy and I," she managed through clinched teeth, "did not do anything wrong. We love each other. We may not be married in your eyes, but we are in God's!"

"You'll do as I say, or you'll find yourself somewhere else to live. I'll not have you under my roof unless you repent."

Tears welled, but Sandy held them back. Nana slipped out of her chair and wrapped an arm around her waist. "Son, think about what you're saying. Do we want our family business aired before the church?"

Sandy pulled away from her. "That's not the point, Nana. I didn't do anything wrong."

"The devil you didn't." He shook his finger.

She couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Oh, how she wanted to slap him, make him understand. But what did he know about love? He'd never loved anything in his life. It's a wonder she and Lee Lee ever got born. She sobbed.

"You've ruined my life, and now you want to humiliate me in front of everyone." The sobs racked her body. "I hate you!" She spun around and ran to her room.

Between outbursts, bits and pieces of the debate in the kitchen carried upstairs, but nothing Mama or Nana could say mattered. The

stubborn old fool didn't ever change his mind. Not John Harris. Not the oldest son of Jacob P. Harris.

How did either of them put up with such pigheaded men all their lives? Praise the Lord Buddy wasn't like that.

Sitting up on her bed, she wiped her eyes. Crying couldn't help. She marched to her closet and retrieved her carpetbag. Methodically, she packed, selecting only those things she would need in her new life with Buddy.

Before she finished, the back door slammed, then her mother tapped her way upstairs. The door creaked opened, but she didn't look up.

"Oh, daughter." Her tone was so sad, it turned Sandy's head. Her mama slumped to the bed and snapped the bag shut. "What are you doing?"

"You heard Papa. I can't live here anymore."

"But where can you go?"

"To Pine Bluff and Buddy."

"He's not there."

She stared at her a moment, hating the dread in Mama's eyes. "Then where is he?"

"I don't know, but he's gone."

"Gone where?" A knot grew in Sandy's stomach. She should have stayed with him, never left the barn. Why had she paid any attention to her hard-hearted father?

"I'm not sure, but he's gone. Nathaniel came by yesterday hunting him. No one's seen him since Thursday."

Her throat went dry, and hard as she tried, she couldn't swallow. "Oh Lord, Mama. Did Papa kill him after all?"

"Gracious no, child." She set the bag off the bed and for the next twenty minutes, explained what happened in the barn after Sandy left, but it didn't sound like the whole truth.

"Your father and I left him there. There's no telling which way he went, but I can tell you for certain, he's gone."

How could she believe it? She could not, refused to believe it. He would never leave without her.

"Nothing's changed, Mama. I still can't stay here. I'll go live with Em and Travis."

"No, Sandra Louise. Please don't drag them into this, not after Emma Lee and your Papa just started making up. Don't put that on your sister, especially not now with her being pregnant."

As usual, Mama was right. Sandy couldn't put Em in the middle. "Of course, when her time comes, she's going to need you. But, until then what am I going to do?"

"Exactly what your father says."

“But I can’t. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Oh, baby, we’ve all sinned and fallen short. Just go down front and rededicate your life. No one will know why, and by next month, no one will even remember.”

“I should never have let him make me leave the barn. I should have stayed with Buddy.”

“No, you did the right the thing. John might’ve hurt Buddy bad if you’d stayed bowed up.”

As much as she wanted to argue, she couldn’t. Mama was right again. She’d never seen Papa fight a man, but had heard enough stories about the few men he’d set straight.

Still, Buddy wasn’t like them. Oh Lord, what was she going to do? She closed her eyes and nodded.

No one spoke on the ride to the church. Papa pulled the Ford to a stop, and everyone piled out but her. She only stared out the window.

No Cadillac, of course.

A bead of perspiration trickled from her temple before she climbed out and headed toward the building. She walked down the outside aisle and slipped in next to Nana. The wooden pews never seemed so hard.

The muscles in the back of her neck tightened more with each song.

Clyde led the music. Wonder if they called him back? Papa must have said something, but how much? And to whom?

The congregation sang the same old hymns without their recent fervor and, of course, slightly off key. By the time Forester finished preaching, her mouth was so dry she didn’t know if it would work.

Oh, if only Buddy would come and save her from this humiliation.

Forester nodded at Clyde, who rose. “Open your song books to page forty-six.”

“While we sing,” Forester invited, “if anyone needs to make a public profession, if you need to repent and rededicate your life, now is the time.”

Everyone around her stood.

“Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me.” The congregation sang with monotonous familiarity in that awful nasal twang. Sandy stood. “Why should we linger and heed not his mercy? Mercy for you and for me. Come home.”

Somehow, she forced her feet to move. Why did Papa have to be so stubborn and mean? She shouldn’t have to be doing this. She didn’t regret her actions, only that her heartless father refused to let them marry. She hated him.

One foot in front of the other.

Heads turned and whispers interrupted the chorus as different

ones punched their neighbor, nodding toward Sandy, but she flung her head back and walked tall. Brother Forester met her as she rounded the corner of the first pew.

“God loves you, child,” he said as he took her hand.

Sandy swallowed. “I . . . need . . .” She ducked her head.

The second verse started, but Jesus wasn't calling her softly and tenderly. John Robert Harris—and him alone—called her to the act of degradation. She really hated him. Why had he forced her to do this?

“I want to rededicate my life.”

The preacher wrapped his arm around her back, and pulled her shoulder to his shoulder. “God forgives you, Sandy.” He guided her to the front pew, the one nobody ever sat in except those who came forward at the end of the services.

He nodded toward Clyde then faced the congregation. Everyone sat down.

“One of our young women has come forward. Y'all know Sandra Louise. Well.” He held his hand out toward her, so she rose and stood beside him. “She comes this morning rededicating her life to Christ.”

Sandy avoided looking at her father. She hated his guts.

The preacher continued. “It takes a lot of courage to do what Sandy Harris has done today. I pray that you all will forgive her as Christ already has.” He raised his hand palm up, and everyone stood.

She stared at the floor's wooden planks.

“I might add the very words spoken by our Lord in a similar situation. ‘Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone.’ So instead of casting stones, let's all extend the hand of Christian love to our little sister.”

What? Dear Lord, what was he saying?

Her heart sank. Blood rushed to her face.

So.

Everyone in the building knew exactly when and under what circumstances Jesus said that. The preacher had uncovered her sin. She felt naked. But how could he have known what her sin was? She never confessed.

Papa, of course. He couldn't wait to run to Forester.

No wonder the preacher didn't quiz her. She gritted her teeth and glared at her father while someone in the back prayed to close the service.

Thank God, it was over.

Folks started drifting out the back. She wiped tears from her cheek. Oh blast, she didn't want to cry, she was sick of crying. Getting out of there was what she wanted, but dutifully nodded politely to the well-wishers and tried her best to ignore the smirks of friends and cousins.

Amongst all those folks she'd known most her life, loneliness settled over her, as though a stranger all of a sudden—like she didn't belong.

What had Buddy said? That she was his home. She'd always thought of Cypress Springs as home, but no longer. It wasn't. Not anymore. He was her home.

“Oh, Buddy, why did you leave without me?”

Chapter Twenty-five



F

or Sandy, the seemingly endless days of summer hung suspended in molasses.

Buddy was gone and hadn't written or sent any word.

Every minute seemed like an hour and hours like weeks. Her ache never abated and often erupted in more tears, usually at night when she missed him most. Partners with the relentless heat wave, the days dragged on, baking the little community way past done.



For Buddy, the summer of '39 raced headlong into uncertainty. While British Prime Minister Chamberlain proclaimed peace in our time and reassured the world Hitler was a nice guy after all, Buddy stewed.

What did he know or care about what happened on the other side of the ocean? His soul lacked peace. His beloved and his father—both lost to him in a span of three months. In all his twenty-five years, he'd never been so low or lonely, even after his mother died.

Once he reached Austin, he rented a cheap room close to a post office and bought himself a box of envelopes and some nice stationery at the Five and Dime. The memory of Sandra Louise Harris dogged his every waking moment.

But he couldn't bring himself to include her in his correspondence. He had to find work before he could think about rescuing his angel, and only one job suited him. He could sing and preach the Good News.

Each morning he wrote ten different congregations listed in his

father's appointment book, offering his services.

Same routine every day, ten glowing letters written in his flowing script, each tailor-made for whichever denomination would receive it. Seventeen days passed before his efforts paid off.

Two invitations arrived, of course for the same time. He chose the further, a backwoods Pentecostal church some twenty miles outside Fort Smith, Arkansas. That way, if he couldn't pull it off by himself, at least no one would know.

Doubts plagued him.

Would his preaching be as good as the old man's?

Why, he'd heard those sermons so many times, he could almost recite them verbatim. Yes, he could do it. So he walked into town, blew two hundred bucks on a nice little '32 coupe, fifteen more on a new suit, then headed north.

The big day finally arrived. While Buddy sat on the deacons' bench of the Rock Creek Pentecostal Church, he wished Sandy could be sitting on the front pew to cheer him on.

The sanctuary filled, and all thoughts of Sandy vanished. His eyes feasted on the congregation as a familiar excitement oozed from every pore.

A winsome blond with a hungry look smiled at him from the third row. Two rows back, the full kissable lips of a lovely brunette caught his attention. They pouted, he mused, from underuse.

Why was he doing this?

Why couldn't Sandy be there to save him?

He just couldn't help it.

The fairer sex utterly fascinated him. He loved everything about them; the way they smelled, their softness, and above all, how they would give themselves to him. . . heart and soul.

Again and again he asked the Lord to take the temptation away.

Every time, he'd justify his behavior as normal for a man and talk himself right out of any conviction. Then when he moved on to the next town, condemnation ate at him. Well, at least the Lord knew his heart. He was just like King David.

While he scanned and counted the sixty-seven-soul congregation, he purposely kept his expression somber. Must maintain a proper appearance and uphold the imagined posture of his position.

After all, he was the visiting evangelist even though he knew full well that hell's fire and brimstone along with a full collection plate must be delivered, or he would be politely informed the revival was over.

A hippy, raw-boned woman he put in her mid-twenties stood between her father and a passel of little sisters. She stared. He looked away, then swept his gaze across the packed pews, slowly returning to

the daughter with piercing dark eyes.

She smiled. He held her gaze a moment, then closed his. She was the one.

Though not pretty, the young lady exuded an animal lustiness Buddy found more desirable than beauty. He glanced up. She still stared. Her old man must have kept her locked away since she started sprouting, and man, she was ripe.

The pastor held up his hands, and the soft murmur died. "Bless the Lord for this fine morning and the visitor He's sent our way." Extending an upturned palm toward him, he crooked his fingers. "Come on over here, Buddy."

Then he turned back to his sheep. "We've got the son of the renowned Nathaniel Nightingale with us today, so be praying some of his father's anointing rubbed off."

The man slapped Buddy's back and heehawed as a ripple of laughter went over the congregation. Wonderful, a comedian.

Buddy smiled, waited for the reverend to take his seat, then took the podium. A heady aroma filled the air from the unprofessional, though no less attractive, arrangement in front of the pulpit. He took a moment to enjoy the gardenia's sweet fragrance.

"Like my father, I don't have anything planned, but in all our years serving God, He's always come through. I'm going to stand here a minute and see what the Lord lays on my heart."

The woman with the full hips caught his attention again. She twirled a brown curl. He pointed at the blonde in the second row. "Loan me that tambourine, Miss?"

The lady smiled and ran to the front with the little drum.

Holding it above his head, he tinkled it ever so slightly, bowing his head. A hush fell, and the tiny cymbals danced in the stillness, followed by a holy silence so thick that if he peeked . . . he'd surely see Jesus Himself.

At his side, his hand gently waved the tambourine. The chiming sounded like angel wings. He softly bumped it against his leg. A beat erupted then a new song stirred in his soul. He shook the instrument a little harder.

Suddenly, he snapped its skin against his palm double time. He threw his head back and belted the song out. His velvet tenor bounced off the walls. Second time through, about half the congregation caught hold.

The house jumped as heavy-soled farmer's boots stomped the floor, and calloused hands slammed together in time to the lively tune.

Finishing one, he started another everyone knew. The songs carried the congregation and himself through the gates of

thanksgiving into the Lord's courts of praise.

Song after song, new and old, they sang and danced to the majesty of the Lord. The lively sounds of triumph and victory faded then gave way to a thick silence. The tinkle of angel wings waved again.

Reverently, Buddy took the congregation into the Holy of Holies and worshipped the Lord.

After a good full hour in that glorious presence, the well of songs in his soul emptied. He stilled himself and basked in the peace and afterglow of being in the Lord's manifest company. Every eye was glued on him.

Then a few folks stirred and looked away. Time to preach.

He thought of the sermon he'd decided on, one of his father's retreads. The old man called it "Coming Out of Egypt." Buddy had heard the message so many times, he could preach it in his sleep.

So long as the people didn't fall asleep and were ready to empty their pockets when the plate passed by, everything would be fine. He motioned for the congregation to be seated. loving it.

Church was what he lived for.

A queasiness welled. He'd never actually brought the message before. The discomfort tried to convince him to run, but he swallowed hard and set his will. He could tell a story. That's all the old man did.

Tell stories from the Bible, then explain what they meant.

He stumbled into an awkward greeting. His gut knotted. What if he couldn't do it? No, he had the gift. Everyone said so, even his father. Buddy relaxed. A calm surfaced, and he pressed into the message.

His words rippled gently out, forming vivid pictures of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Pharaoh's Egypt. Just as he was about to immerse them into the climactic moment when the Israelites gave so much they had to be restrained, his voice failed him.

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. There was hardly even time to think about what was happening before a wave of power washed over his soul.

Goose flesh raised on his arms and neck.

Remorse flooded his heart. His adulterous past overwhelmed him. For two torturous heartbeats he resisted. He wasn't David, and the Holy Ghost was right. He was a sinner.

"Oh Lord, forgive me."

Another wave of power surged over him, then a third. Sparkles of gold lit both corners of his peripheral vision, steadily increased, then sprinkled down to cover the faces in the crowd.

All faded into the glow, then disappeared completely.

On the golden background, a rustic cabin and two middle-aged farmers materialized. One of the men fished a dollar bill out of his

boot and exchanged it for a mason jar filled with an amber liquid.

The cabin and the bootlegger then melted into the glow, leaving only the man holding the moonshine. Freddy Ward.

Goose flesh rose again—except he ‘d rather call the sensation ‘glory bumps’—and he knew the man's name. Then suddenly, everything was as before, except for a few golden sparkles hanging around one man, the purchaser.

Buddy clamped his mouth shut, swallowed, then walked around the wooden pulpit. He stared at the man he had seen in his vision. The farmer, dressed in a tattered white shirt and dirty overalls, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and looked away.

“Freddy Ward.” Buddy shouted. The man jerked around, a pained expression on his face. “Stand up, Mister Ward.” Freddy grabbed the pew in front of him, looked around sheepishly, and finally stood.

“Yes, sir?”

“Freddy, the Lord says if you'll come lay that dollar you've got hid in your boot on His altar . . .” Buddy pointed at the platform in front of his feet. “. . . He will set you free.”

Buddy's heart raced. He'd never done anything like this before. Doubt buffeted him, but he knew God was in this thing.

Ward wiped his hand over his mouth. “I ain't got no dollar in my boot.” He extended himself to his full height and proclaimed it as though a boast.

Fear fused with Buddy's excitement. A tingling started at his shoulders then spread to his hands. He raised his right arm slowly and pointed at Freddy.

“Come lay that whiskey dollar down, brother. Don't make the Lord wait. A chance to be free doesn't come along every day.”

Beads of perspiration popped out on Ward's forehead. He held on tight to the back of the pew in front of him, squeezing until his knuckles turned bone white. His pained expression deepened into a pathetic grimace above slumped shoulders. His eyes pleaded for a reprieve.

Buddy jumped off the stage. The thump echoed through the old building, shaking the floor and rattling the window panes. Everyone stared. He held out his hand. “The Lord's calling you, Freddy Ward.”

The farmer pulled a wadded handkerchief from a pocket and mopped his brow. He bent over. Slowly uncoiling himself, he stared at his clinched fist for a second, then opened his hand.

One eye of a crumpled George Washington stared out. Ducking his head, Ward shuffled past the gawking onlookers and down the aisle.

Buddy's heart leapt. His confidence soared. He wanted to shout, but restrained himself. He turned sideways and pointed toward the podium. “Just lay it down,” he said, then stepped back as the older

man neared.

Ward reached the platform, but kept his hands at his sides and his chin pressed against his chest. He looked at Buddy and whispered. "I can't."

"Sure, you can. Just like the Lord told me your name, He says if you'll lay that money on the altar, He's going to set you free." Buddy touched the man's shoulder. Power surged from his hand.

The farmer stood still only a moment then shied away like he'd gotten all he needed and couldn't stand any more. He grinned at Buddy then placed the bill on the altar with the utmost care.

Ward backed away a step, then two. He froze. The congregation held its breath. Ward faced them and shot both arms high into the air.

"I'm free. The Lord's set me free."

The people erupted in shouts and clapping. Buddy ran over in front of Ward and held out his hands. Everyone quieted. He moved to the farmer's side and wrapped an arm around him.

"Mister Ward, how do you know you're free?"

He looked at Buddy and grinned. "Because I don't want a drink."

A few encouraging shouts and cheers rolled in, but Buddy held up his hand again.

"Wait, folks. This thing ain't finished yet." He pointed at Ward, but looked at them. "Anyone want what Freddy got? Come and lay your dollar down, then whatever has ahold of you. . . makes no difference what it is. . . God's going to set you free."

At first, nobody moved except for the few who squirmed uncomfortably in their wooden seats. In the back, a teenage boy stepped into the aisle. All heads turned, but he never took his eyes off Buddy.

By the time he reached halfway, ten others rose and followed him to the front. Buddy sank into the first pew, totally drained. Relief mixed with disbelief.

The teen placed his dollar on the platform then fell on his knees and cried. The center aisle soon crowded with sinners waiting their turn to lay their money down. Buddy rested his elbows on his knees and buried his face into his hands.

"What have I done? They're all going to expect God to do something."

He turned his head and looked under his arm at the folks in the aisle. Without meeting anyone's eyes, he could see all the greenbacks in their hands. An inner voice, the one he didn't like but usually followed, whispered.

"Should've told them five instead of just one."

Self-loathing filled Buddy's soul. He slipped off the pew to the floor. He pressed his forehead against the worn wooden planks and

covered his neck and head with his hands. Buddy sank into himself.

Hands touched his back and shoulders, but he didn't respond. He wanted the floor to open and swallow him. Sure that his career as an evangelist was over before it even started, he chastised himself again and again.

When the dark mood finally lifted, Buddy sat up and blinked. The building appeared empty. All the money was gone. He hoisted himself onto the pew, confused. How much time had elapsed?

"Brother Nightingale?" a husky female voice whispered across the empty sanctuary.

Buddy craned his neck. The farmer's daughter he had spotted earlier stood just inside the door. She was the last person he wanted to see.

She sauntered down the aisle toward him. The sweet scent of rosewater reached him a good way ahead of her. She stopped. When she brushed her chestnut hair back from her face, apprehension and anticipation colored her cheeks.

He closed his eyes and wished her away.

"Reverend?" Her petticoat rustled against the end of his pew. He opened his eyes. "Mind if I call you Buddy?" she asked in a sweet Arkansas accent.

"Does your pa know you're here?"

Her brows knitted then recognition flashed across her face. "You must've thought Malcolm were my pa." She grinned a toothy smile. "The old geezer's my husband. My pa ain't stepped foot inside a church in a coon's age."

Leaning back into the hard wooden bench, he resolved not to let anything get started. "Well then, does your husband know you're still here?"

The young woman slipped in beside him. "Yes, sir. He knows." She pushed her knee into Buddy's thigh.

Buddy's resolution dissolved when he turned and looked into her eyes. "Then how come you're here?"

"I told him an angel whispered in my ear." She winked. "And that if you prayed for me, I'd give him a son." She grabbed Buddy's hand and brought it to her mouth. She kissed each finger then his palm.

"He took the girls on home. Everyone 'cept me must've got tired of waiting, I guess. They're all gone. It's just us'ns here." The woman kissed his hand again then put it on her stomach. "Pray for me?"

Buddy closed his eyes and as if his fingers possessed a mind of their own, began probing her lush softness.

Chapter Twenty-six



uddy glanced at the little house.

Supposed to stay there, he slumped down in his car seat. “Oh Lord. What have I done?” He shut his eyes, unable to go inside.

What would those people think? They left a light on, but must have gone to sleep hours ago. “Why did I do it?” He said aloud for the fiftieth time since dropping Malcolm’s wife off home. He hated himself, hated being so weak.

More than anything, he hated having to admit he was a sinner. God’s men were supposed to be perfect.

Stomping the engine to life, he eased the coupe into gear and pulled past the house. The moon’s light shone bright enough to see the hands on his watch. Half past one. He drove slowly along the twisting two-lane road unable to rejoice in the new day.

New days should bring fresh beginnings, second chances, but guilt and condemnation weighed him down. Lamentations three twenty-three just didn’t ring true.

Climb to the summit then snake back down. That’s how his life had been. Soar to the heavens then dive for the pits. Just like King David. So in love with God one minute, then wallowing in adultery the next.

“Oh Father. Forgive me for laying with that woman. But even more, forgive me for putting my seed in her.” After Ruby, he’d never ever taken that chance. He always stayed in control, but not that night.

No, he was such a fool.

His mind wandered back. His inner eye saw her sprawled out on

the front pew, naked as the day she was born. Her passion ignited a fire that once sparked, burned uncontrollably. Right there in the church.

And a married woman.

His heart beat faster just thinking about her. "Oh God, stop me. I'm doing it again, committing adultery all over again in my thoughts. Forgive me. Help me to do Your will."

Disgusted with himself, he tired of all the twists and turns and pulled off on a wide shoulder. He'd tell them at the service that night he was moving on. He couldn't stay around that woman.

"Lord, don't let her get pregnant from what I did tonight."

All that night and the next day, Buddy prayed and fasted, begging the Almighty to not hold what he did against all the folks that brought their dollars to the altar.

Though he didn't actually ask, he sure hoped God could see fit to keep his indiscretion a secret.

By five forty-five that evening, the second night of the revival, Buddy convinced himself that the Lord would work everything out. The meeting began much the same as the night before, except it wasn't.

For the most part, he'd kept his eyes glued to his Bible while the congregation filtered in. Then he looked hard at the folks. They radiated a peaceful glow, and almost two dozen more folks had showed up.

That seemed a good sign. Unless they had brought help to tar and feather him.

The pastor stood. "Bless the Lord, folks. I haven't felt this good in years. How 'bout you?" They all clapped and a few shouted agreement or praises. He held out his hand toward Buddy. "Come on, son. Let's see what God's got in store for us tonight."

Relief swept over Buddy as he stood. "Well, I think what we need to do first is have some testimonials. Let's hear what's happened since last night." He pointed at Freddy Ward. "What about you, Mister Ward? You want to go first?"

Freddy jumped to his feet. "I sure do."

Buddy sat on the edge of his seat as Ward hurried to the front. He stopped at the first step and faced the congregation.

"Last night was the first time I went to bed sober in fifteen years." He glanced at Buddy. "Thank you, brother, for helping me lay that dollar down." A tear trickled along the ridge of his nose. "God bless you, Buddy Nightingale. God set me free."

"Praise the Lord," someone in the back hollered.

The lady who loaned him the tambourine shook the instrument over her head. "Thank you, Jesus. God is so good."

Agreement swept through the room. Buddy's heart leapt. He smiled at Ward. The farmer nodded then returned to his seat.

By ones and twos, about half the crowd made their way to the front and testified to how the Lord had touched them after they put a dollar on the altar. Buddy loved it, loved being in God's house, hearing folks brag on His goodness.

Didn't bother him at all that three young ladies couldn't take their eyes off him. Would have troubled him if Malcolm and his wife had darkened the door; though he hated to admit it.

So much like King David in so many ways, but the Lord would forgive him anything, wouldn't He? After all, he had the gift.

A young boy finished giving thanks, and it didn't appear anyone else wanted to talk. Buddy waited a second then marched to the pulpit. A reverent hush fell. He loved it.

"Bless the Lord. Isn't He good?"

Hallelujahs and Praise-the-Lords filled the sanctuary. He let the congregation shout and carry on for a few minutes then slapped his cupped hands together. The shouts died.

Scanning the small group, he made eye contact with as many as would hold his gaze.

"The Lord wants me to say something." He walked around the pulpit and stepped down to the first step. "Tonight's got to be my last at Rock Creek." A collective groan rumbled. He held up his hands. "No. I've got to go, but before I do, there's some people here who don't know Jesus."

Most believers stared while the Holy Ghost dealt with those who looked away. He picked out one young man obviously about to cry under so much conviction and spoke to him like it only the two of them sat on a bench, discussing the Lord's plan.

For better than an hour Buddy talked about all the many benefits of giving your life to God. Hell's fire came up, but he ended with extolling the whitening power of the Blood.

Then he stopped.

"I've said all I'm going to. It's up to you. Either you accept what God has for you, or you don't. Your choice. If you want to be saved, come on down front."

The young man trotted down the aisle and fell crying into his arms, with the three young women who'd been eyeing Buddy right behind him. After all was said and done, eighteen people confessed Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

When the last one left, Buddy floated outside, ecstatic. The pastor had given him all the dollars from the night before even though Buddy told him his pockets were full of bills that folks had stuffed in as going away presents.

He didn't know what to do or where to go, but it didn't matter. He had the gift. The Lord confirmed it with the money. It's what the old man always told him.

The Lord sure was good.



Within a week, the Reverend Nightingale heard all about the revival in Rock Creek, not that Buddy wrote. With over fifty women in his flock, rarely a day passed without news. Though discouraging gossip, he usually heard more than he wanted.

Through that grapevine, several stories concerning Buddy came in. A neighbor from the next county found the blackened Cadillac the same morning his son disappeared. To each report, he gave a standard reply.

"Sister, I pray for my son every day, but he belongs to the Lord, and I trust God to keep him. I'm not worried. Bless His name. Maybe this is what the boy needs. He's working on his testimony."

Herding the latest bearer of bad news toward her car, he studied the western sky. Almost sunset. He sure was partial to sitting on his new porch watching the sun slide into the Texas hills, enjoying the uniqueness of each one.

After almost fifteen minutes of maneuvering, Nathaniel finally got her in the car and himself headed toward his rocker.

So many colors displayed brilliantly across the sky. They amazed him time after time, the pinks, purples, yellows, and golds. Was his dear Evelyn enjoying the sight as well? He would never quit missing her, but he'd join her one day.

Then never be parted again.

A honk stopped him halfway to the parsonage. He glanced over his shoulder. The gypsy, Calliope, waved from the window of that extravagant Rolls.

His eyes went to heaven. "Oh Lord."

"Reverend Nightingale. Reverend Nightingale." The woman jumped out. "You must come at once. At once I say. It is imperative. Madam is dying."

Nathaniel swallowed. He didn't know what to do. "Help me, Lord."

The gypsy jangled her way toward him while the driver stood looking over the top of the car, Madam's son, Harry, if memory served. Nathaniel held out his arms and caught the woman.

"You cannot refuse. You must come now."

"Calliope, I'll come, but I can't do anything 'cept pray."

“Ah, but you can, for my own eyes have seen it. Madam must have one of your miracles or alas, my tarot cards reveal she will die before morning.”

She raised both hands and more than two dozen golden bracelets tinkled toward her elbows. “Hurry, preacher. Come. No time to lose.”

Glancing to his porch, saddened to miss God’s painting the sky, he let her lead him toward the fancy car. He caught Harry’s eye which held a sad, but resigned look. Maybe with a little embarrassment.

Nathaniel offered a quick ‘it’s-all-right’ smile then slipped into the back seat.

Neither he or the man said a word on the trip to Austin, while the gypsy rattled on the entire time about how her lady would be fine, she just knew it. Nathaniel didn’t think so. He’d made this same trip and prayed for the woman the first time about three months ago just after the twister.

Since then, the gypsy also loaded the dying woman in the Rolls and brought her twice to Pine Bluff for a miracle. If the Lord was going to heal her, He was sure waiting until the last minute.

Finally, Harry pulled up in front of the Weatherford Hotel. Madam had the whole top floor to herself. The scripture about a rich man having trouble getting into heaven struck him as he hurried through the ornate lobby.

It wasn’t impossible, nothing was with the Lord, but . . . He stopped himself. He wasn’t her judge. She claimed to be a Christian, though her life . . . He stopped himself again. The elevator doors slid open.

“What floor, please?” The operator looked past Nathaniel. “Sorry, the Penthouse.”

“Please.” The woman’s son appeared a bit perturbed.

The steel cage lurched up. Nathaniel hated the elevator, but not more than the thought of climbing fifteen stories. Mercifully, they reached the top. Calliope trotted toward a far door.

Harry led him through an elaborately carved and gilded set of French doors. The delicious fragrance of fresh-cut roses filled the air from several enormous arrangements in the room.

“May I get you something? Uh, a drink maybe?”

The decor, though a little gaudy, pleased Nathaniel’s eye. He swung his head to face his host. “A Coca-Cola would be nice.”

“Want anything in it?” Harry headed toward a mirrored bar. “Rum, Jack Daniel’s? I got it all.”

Nathaniel laughed. “No, just coke, thanks.”

The man’s lip thinned, and his eyes flashed. “What’s so funny?”

“I’ve dreamed of being in a place like this with all the booze I could ever want.” He shook his head. “But the Lord set me free. I don’t

want it now at all.”

“You were an alcoholic?”

“Once, but not anymore.”

The man handed Nathaniel his soda. “What happened?”

Before he could answer, the bedroom door swung open. “Madam wants you both.”

“Did you give her a shot?” Harry ushered Nathaniel ahead of him.

Calliope nodded and steeped aside. The room could be described as stale. In sharp contrast to the sitting area, a heavy, medicinal smell battled the stench of putrid flesh, unaffected by another vase of maybe five dozen roses on a table near the foot of the bed.

Beautiful they were, but their sweet aroma wasted there. With curtains drawn tight, the room was veiled in shadows from two table lamps.

Nathaniel neared the woman’s bed. She’d lost more weight, and disease colored her skin a sickly yellow. “How you doing, Mis’ess Prescott?”

She held out her hand. It shook then dropped back to the bed. “Not too good,” she managed in a raspy voice then closed her eyes. Her chest heaved then air rattled out.

He slipped his hand over hers. “Bless the Lord.” He bowed his head. “Father, I need to know what You want me to do.” He waited. Nothing. Not a word. He continued to wait. Ten minutes of her labored breathing passed.

The gypsy poked his shoulder. “Madam is dying. Make her well. Take the curse off.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “I’m not the miracle worker, dear Calliope. God is.”

The woman shook her fist at him. “Yes, you are. With these two good eyes.” She pointed at her dark, painted eyes. “I have seen you heal a man’s withered arm. And also that little girl. She was blind! You prayed, then she could see.”

“But, dear woman . . .”

She squinted fiercely through welling tears. “My eyes tell me no lies, Reverend.” She looked at the son. “I saw these things. He can do it. Give him money, Harry.”

“If it would help . . .”

“No, no. I don’t want your money.”

The dam broke, and endless streams of sorrow wet her blouse. “Make him do it,” she sobbed. “Please, make him.”

Harry said nothing, just turned his head.

She faced Nathaniel again. “Please.”

The sorrow in her eyes broke Nathaniel’s heart. “I’m sorry, Calliope, but I’m only a vessel. God is the healer. Without the Holy

Ghost moving, I can do nothing to help Mis'ess Prescott."

She stared a moment, then a noise turned her head. Madam gasped then relaxed. Harry grabbed her wrist, felt for a pulse, then held his ear to her mouth. "She's gone."

Calliope shrieked then burst into tears. Nathaniel held out his arms. The woman slumped to the floor. "Why? Why didn't you heal her?"

His arms dropped to his side. "I wish I could have."

Chapter Twenty-seven



ith every passing day, Sandy sunk deeper.

Even plotting against her father didn't help anymore. Her every thought centered around Buddy's return. The certainty of him sneaking back and taking her away had faded, but it scared her to think he might never come.

Maybe Papa was right about him all along.

How could she have been so wrong? Buddy couldn't love her, or he never would have left.

But he said he did.

"Oh Lord, how can I live without him?"

The remorse of getting caught constantly gnawed at her. She wished again she'd have picked a better place. If only Papa hadn't interfered, Buddy would never have left. In her heart, she knew it and hated John Harris all over again for ruining her life.

Her humiliation in front of the whole community earned her the right to stay under his roof, but the house closed in on her more, daily. She wanted desperately to get out of there. But what if Buddy did come back?

Each day Sandy completed her chores as quickly and efficiently as possible then retreated upstairs. Despite the heat, she moved off the porch and spent all her free time in her room, teaching herself to inhale.

Smoking proved the only thing she'd come up with to spite her father. Not that she could work up the nerve to do it in front of him, but when she did, she was going . . .

Who was she kidding? She'd always been too chicken to stand up to him. Not like Lee Lee. Her sister would blow a smoke ring right in

his face.

Sandy pulled her vanity stool over to the window and struck a match. The fixings had come from Papa's Prince Albert can. She paused, waiting for the sulfur to burn off, then held the flame to the end of her cigarette and sucked hard.

She inhaled the smoke only a few seconds before spasms of racking coughs choked her. Though quite adept at rolling the tobacco in the rice papers, inhaling was something else again. The next draw was not so hard.

Resisting the urge to cough, she swallowed then blew the smoke out the window. For as long as she could remember, she hated the nasty things, but now held fast to a solid determination to acquire the habit. She owed it to her father.

Just as she raised the half-smoked cigarette to her lips again, a soft patter caught her ear. Oh, no. Nana was climbing the stairs. Sandy searched the room, snuffed out the smoldering butt, and fanned the air frantically, flapping her skirt at the window.

Nana reached the landing.

Sandy ran and jumped on the bed, flipped an old magazine open, and waited, heart pounding. A light knock sounded, then the door swung open.

"Oh my. How can you stand this heat?" Nana fanned herself as she sat on the bed.

"It isn't too bad." She looked to the floor, suddenly aware why the old woman made the climb. Since Sandy was only knee-high to a grasshopper, the old dear always told her how wonderful John Robert was.

No doubt about it. Here came another sermon.

Nana patted Sandy's knee. "Sweetheart, what happened to you was wrong, dreadful wrong all the way around. Seems to me like none of the menfolk've been doing right by you."

Did her ears hear right? Was Nana taking her side? She cut her eyes at her grandmother without raising her head. The sunlight filtering across the room through her silver white wisps haloed her wrinkled face.

"What do you mean?"

"You heard me clear enough. There wasn't anything right about John Robert making you go down there in front of the whole church, and I told him so." She patted Sandy's leg again.

"But, child, there's something you need to understand. It wasn't just you he sent to confess."

Swinging her leg onto the bed, Sandy faced her grandmother. "What are you talking about? Who else did he make go?"

The old woman slipped her hand over Sandy's. "Well, no one

really. He never could do nothing about the others who broke his heart, but in sending you, he sent them, too. He could make you go.”

“What others?”

“I figure he wrapped up the hurt you caused him with that old pain he's carried so long.” She looked away. “Somehow or another, he must of figured that you confessing would remedy all his heart aching.”

“But Nana, who else besides Emma Lee? I thought he'd never get over her running off and getting married, but Mama and him's always been sweet on each other ever since he came home from the war. Isn't that right?”

The old dear dabbed at her forehead with her ever-present white hanky.

“That's a story you were allowed to assume, and it's pretty much true I guess, but they just never mention the girl John thought would be waiting. She's the one he'd loved since he's a kid. Your mama's cousin.”

“Papa loved Cousin Lora?”

“Not Lora. Her sister, Leah.”

“Cousin Lora has a sister? Leah? Well, where is she?”

“No one knows. Ran off with a young man a couple of months before my John got home from Germany.”

Unbelievable. Why hadn't Sandy ever heard any of this before? She stiffened her back to stop a shiver. Opening doors to family secrets was almost like stepping into another life.

Her grandmother pushed herself off the bed and walked to the window. Sandy twirled and stretched out on her stomach, chin propped on the heels of her palms. “So how come I never heard about this Leah?”

“Well, her leaving 'bout killed Uncle Jed and Aunt Eva. She and your mama was born just six weeks apart. Grew up almost like sisters, so having no word when she left upset Miranda pretty bad, too.”

Nana rubbed her elbow, swollen by the arthritis that troubled her so, and unconsciously winced. “We never heard from Leah again. Don't know to this day whether she's dead or alive.”

“That's awful.”

“I'd never seen my son in such a state when he got back. He seemed so depressed. Guess his and your Mama's mutual sorrow's what got them together. They fell in love and married three months later.”

“I see.”

“You were born the next year. I never saw a need to mention it till now. Just hoped you might understand and maybe not judge your papa so harsh.”

As if seeing into the days gone by, Nana stared out the window looking older than she ever had. An aged hand reached out and brushed back a stray hair. Pale gray eyes turned with love toward Sandy

Something said earlier jumped out in Sandy's mind. "You said the others. Who else broke Papa's heart?"

"Maggie. My sweet Maggie. When she died, it broke his heart. Oh, I know he's never said so, but he always blamed himself."

"But how could he? Wasn't he helping Grand plow when she fell?"

"My Maggie fell out of the loft all right, but . . ." Nana swiped at a tear and gazed back out the window. Her voice cracked. "She tied a rope around her neck first."

Sandy's hand flew to her mouth to cover the gasp. Aunt Maggie killed herself? Everyone always talked about it as though it was an accident. She'd been betrayed, lied to all her life.

Conflicting emotions churned inside.

Though memories of Maggie were vague, an intense grief engulfed her. Poor Nana. How did she ever get through it? Compassion held anger at bay, but didn't change the fact that they had all lied.

Should she cry or cuss? She couldn't decide, but most of all, she wanted to hear more. Know the whole truth. "But why? Why would Aunt Maggie commit suicide? And why would Papa blame himself for what his sister did?"

Nana walked back to the bed and rubbed crippled fingers over Sandy's hair. "Maggie was pregnant, sweetheart, and John Robert took the fault for not taking better care of his baby sister."

Staring at her grandmother, partly in disbelief, but mostly mesmerized by the dark family secrets she shared, she weighed the news. Suddenly, it all came together.

"But me and Buddy didn't do anything wrong." She rubbed her stomach. "I'm not pregnant. I'm not Aunt Maggie or Leah either. I'm Sandra Louise, and nothing gives Papa the right to treat me like he did."

Tears welled.

Her grandmother sat down and pulled her into a fragile hug. She smelled so good, like lilacs. "I know, child, I know. I told you I told him so myself. Just figured you needed to understand him a little better. . . why he was so hard on you."

She squeezed, and Sandy relaxed, letting the old woman hug her.

If only her Papa . . . She bowed and sighed. Why wish? If-onlys could go on forever, and still John Robert Harris would never change. What could the use be?

Nana grasped Sandy's shoulders and held her at arm's length. Looking her in the eyes, she whispered, "You've grown up, Sandy. I'll

miss you.” She smiled.

“Miss me? What are you talking about now? I did what he told me. Is he going to kick me out anyway?”

“Oh, no. No. I wrote to Leland. He said you'd be more than welcome to come up and live with him and your Aunt Samantha while you go to business school in Sherman.”

Sandy's heart jumped into her throat. Could she really be getting out of this god forsaken place? Then her father's scowling face flashed before her eyes. “Papa would never allow it. Would he?”

“I already talked with him. He said it was up to you.”

Chapter Twenty-eight



andy leaned into the wooden seat and relaxed.

The awkward farewells at the station were over. The train lurched, paused as if to gather strength, then pulled slowly out of the station, settling into a labored rocking. Just like she remembered.

Strange that vivid images of getting on the train remained, but not much else.

She knew the story, heard it more times than she could count, about her mama taking her to Dennison. She'd only been three years old, and the doctors said she was dying, though none of them could figure out why.

As a last resort, her mother went to her favorite uncle who spared no expense in finding a cure. Sandy didn't remember the trip, just the retelling and getting on the train.

Never had she dreamed she'd be repeating the journey almost fifteen years later.

Her Great-Uncle Leland and Aunt Sammy had visited some, but it must be close to six years since they came to Cypress Springs. Which was fine with her.

For some reason, just being herself gave her a little trouble when they were around. Their presence made her uncomfortable, like she owed them or something.

Oh well, that would have to change because here they were, shoring up her life again.

Up ahead a lot full of cattle waiting for their trip to the Fort Worth slaughterhouses caught her eye. As the train chugged north, a heaviness dropped off her. Her life was her own now.

Unlike the beef, she no longer lived at the mercy of others, especially not John Robert Harris, and she relished the thought.

Then Buddy clouded her mind. She wanted to be doing this with him, not alone. Forget him, forget them all. I'm free, and I don't need any of them.

"You'll go to the devil for lying same as stealing," she said aloud in a fair imitation of her mother.

While she watched the holding pens, a large black man opened a gate and prodded several cows up a ramp and into a cattle car. Pity tugged at her heartstrings.

Grateful her father could no longer make her go here or there, she looked away. Sandy knew where pot roast came from, but didn't like to think about it. It always hurt her heart when Papa butchered a steer.

A faint chorus of bellows drifted through the open window as the train passed a cattle car full of the condemned.

"That's exactly what would have happened to me if I hadn't gotten out. They would have sucked the life right out of me."



Three cars ahead, Harrison Prescott noticed the same loading pens as the train rolled out of Austin, but didn't give the beasts a second thought. He was taking his mother home to Dallas.

A mirth lurked in his gut. He should be sad, he told himself over and over, but he couldn't bring himself to it. She had been dying for better than three years. At last it was over. Nothing would please him more than to have her back.

But he wanted the real her, not the living corpse he watched waste away.

"I'm going to stretch my legs, Calliope."

The gypsy nodded her swollen, red eyes that still pleaded for the miracle that never came.

"You going to be all right?" He patted her shoulder.

Though eccentric, the dear woman would have given her own life had she been able, and he loved her almost as much as his mother. She waved him off. The ever-present bracelets jangled.

When little, he swore she could make the silver rings talk.

"No, dear Harry boy. This old woman will never be right again. Madam is gone. Lost to me forever." Little rivers of tears overflowed her puffy eyes, and she sobbed into both hands.

Again, he patted her shoulder then walked out of first class. While he made his way through the dining car, memories of his mother came back to him. He loved escorting her. Heads always turned, even after she got sick.

Never had he laid his eyes on a more beautiful woman. But she was gone. What a waste. He pushed open the door to the third car and immediately spotted her.

How was it possible? He stepped closer. The spitting image of his mother at twenty stared out the window, her lips pressed tight in a forlorn expression. Like his mother, the woman's sky blue eyes bore a deep sadness.

For a moment he stared.

Her classic beauty was a true reincarnation.

In that instant he fell hopelessly in love. Maybe there was a God. Harrison inched closer, if she was cut from the same cloth as his mother, he knew exactly how to handle her.

Sandy pulled out a new pack of Lucky Strikes. The nasty things tasted better every day. She smiled at her reflection as she lowered the inside window. "I'm never going back," she said aloud.

"Where are you not ever going back to, if I may inquire?"

Snapping her head toward the voice, she found a large-framed man dressed in an expensive suit and sporting a fancy straw hat stood in the aisle.

Except for the conceited smirk, handsome enough, though not in Buddy's class. His dark eyes intrigued her. They seemed to pierce into her innermost self. As far as the mustache, maybe he should shave.

"Mama told me never talk to strangers." Sandy returned to window gazing and pulled a long drag off her cigarette.

He sat down sideways in the empty seat in front of her. "Oh, I'm not too strange." She glanced back, and he tipped his hat. "Actually, I'm not very strange at all, so I couldn't possibly be he whom your mama warned you about."

She bit her lip. It looked as if to keep from smiling. "Well, you look pretty strange to me all decked out in that funny hat."

He removed the offending fedora and made a great show of examining it. "I do believe you're right. It does look funny. If I promise not to wear this funny looking thing, would you tell me your name? Mine's Harrison Prescott."

The hat sailed out the window. She giggled and covered her mouth.

"And how do you feel about the suit?"

He grinned ear to ear as he tugged at his coat.

"It's fine. Just fine, really." She choked back more giggles. "Matter of fact, I like it real well."

His manner seemed to amuse her.

"I'm Sandra."



She couldn't remember the last time she laughed, but complete ease eluded Sandy. The female grapevine in Cypress Springs enjoyed plenty of juicy stories about city slickers, and the fellow sure fit the bill.

"So, where was it you're never going back to?"

"Home."

"My father always said chickens come home to roost."

"Not me. Besides, I'm no chicken."

Her father's stern face flashed in her mind's eye, accusing her of another lie.

She glanced at a pudgy uniformed man who approached collecting tickets. His gray hair curled around the edges of his dark blue pillbox hat. He tipped its brim to the little old lady sitting several rows up.

When he finished with her, the conductor paused beside Harrison who presented his ticket, while Sandy dug in the outside pocket of her carpet bag until she found hers. She held it out. The conductor punched a hole in both and returned them.

Harrison scooted to the bench's end, leaning his back against the window. His eyes followed the old man to the far end of the car, then he pulled a silver flask from his inside coat pocket.

With a wink, he tipped the container to his lips.

"What's that?" Sandy threw her cigarette butt out the window and sniffed. "Smells so good, like peppermint." She leaned forward as he waved the opened flask under her nose. "I thought it was alcohol, but it smells too good."

"You like it?"

"I have to admit, when I was a little girl, I could never get enough peppermints. They've always been my favorite flavor."

"Well then, by all means, Miss . . . Miss?"

"Harris. Sandra Harris."

"Well, Miss Harris, it's definitely peppermint. Would you like to try a bit?" He handed her the container.

First, she admired the flask's engraving then filled her lungs with its sweet fragrance. "Mmm. It smells so delicious." Should she drink after him? Tentatively lifting it to her lips, she tilted it slightly and took in a mouthful.

Her eyes opened wide, and she looked around frantically. Oh to spit, but she swallowed instead, coughing and fanning wildly. "That's hard liquor. It burned my throat." She pressed her back firmly against her wooden seat, glaring.

The man screwed the cap back on. "Sorry. It isn't actually, you know. Hard liquor, I mean. It's schnapps. I imbibe a little now and then, strictly for medicinal purposes. I truly regret it wasn't as you

expected.”

She looked out her window. The warm afternoon air blew the bangs off her forehead. In spite of herself, she liked the odd fellow. Turning, she gave him a grin.

“The Church of . . .” Sandy bit her tongue. She definitely was no church goer anymore. That was one thing she had decided for sure, and in this most certain state of fallen grace, she figured it wouldn't be cricket to go quoting scripture or doctrine.

Actually, because the Church of Christ didn't hold with drinking, it gave her all the more reason to have another little taste.

“What were you saying about the church?”

“Oh, nothing.” She peered out the window again. Not only were the colors beginning to change, but the landscape as well. The familiar cedars and cactus disappeared, and the hills flattened some, rolling their way north.

“So may I have another taste of your schnapps?” Hoping to sound nonchalant, she batted her lashes.

“Why, of course.” He retrieved the flask from his pocket, removed the cap, and poured it full then handed it to her. “You're most welcome to as much as you like. It's best to toss it. Won't burn as bad.”

With only a slight hesitation, she threw the clear liquid in, swallowing quickly. The burning quickly cooled to a warmth that slid down her throat and settled comfortably. A gasping breath stiffened her back.

“Thank you.” A shudder raced to her shoulders. She returned the cap to him. His smile made her laugh.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She fished into her purse and came out with a Lucky. Like she'd been smoking for years, she tapped it against the heel of her palm.

As the cigarette reached her lips, a flame ignited in front of it. She touched his hand to steady the light and inhaled a lungful of smoke. Her head spun. She dropped her book of matches back into her purse.

After blowing a thick column of smoke toward the window, she smiled. “Thanks, Harry.”

His eyes twinkled as he snapped the lighter shut. “You're welcome.” He took another sip. “Harry, is it?”

“Harrison is so formal. Harry suits you. Don't you like it?”

“I'd be pleased for you to call me Harry, Miss Harris.” Before he replaced the cap on the flask, he tilted the container toward her.

Combing fingers through her hair, she couldn't help smiling bigger. She definitely enjoyed his company. “Sure. Why not?” And his schnapps.

The minty liquid went down like a slide down the chute at

Cypress Springs Falls. She swallowed twice then returned the silver container.

"That stuff tastes just like peppermint candy. I really love it."

"Glad you do, Sandra Harris." He arched one brow. "So, is that your real name?"

The question repeated slow motion in her fuzzy mind. Her tummy glowed from the liquor's warmth. "Of course." Why would he think she'd lied? She focused. "Sandra Louise Harris, actually. But everyone calls me Sandy. Except Papa when he's upset."

"Well, pleased to meet you, Sandy."

"Why don't you sit back here?" Her hand patted the bench beside her. She stared at the spot then burst out laughing. "That way, you won't have to crane your neck all day."

He moved, and they chatted the rest of the afternoon away, smoking and sneaking an occasional nip. If only he were Buddy. Just before the sunset, he treated her to dinner in the diner's car.

"Nothing fancy," he said, but boy was it.

She'd never been served by a black waiter dressed in a fancy suit with a little white cloth draped over his arm, nor eaten Beef Wellington, nor drank red wine.

When the bill came, she couldn't see the amount, but Harry pulled several dollars—she noted at least one was a ten—from his bulging wallet. More than ten bucks for one meal? She could hardly imagine!

Talking over empty plates until the schnapps and wine took their toll, she excused herself, stood, then took a wobbly step toward the ladies' room. The train rocked.

Her stomach flipped, dinner started back up. Her hand shot out toward Harry.

"Help me. I think I may be sick."

He jumped to his feet, wrapped his arm around her waist, then guided her to the ladies' room. Once inside, she knelt over the porcelain bowl. Her delicious meal exploded from her mouth and nose, only it didn't taste nearly as good.

Retch and spit, spit and retch. The rancid stench gagged her. Though her insides tried to make their way up her throat, the last few times, her stomach heaved blanks. What would Papa think if he could see her then?

Ha! She didn't care. About him or Buddy. If only he could see her and Harry. He'd be sorry.

Propping against the commode, she rose to her feet then walked slowly to the lavatory. She turned on the faucet, dampened her fingers in the cool water, then patted her face. The wooziness subsided.

Amazingly, she felt much better, but had to get rid of that awful taste. One hand cupped under the flow. After two or three swishes and

spits, she straightened her blouse then turned to go.

Harry leaned against the wall, waiting. "You all right?"

Despite his fancy clothes and fat wallet, she really liked him. He was nice. She liked his dinner, his schnapps, and his wine, even if she did have to spew most of it into the toilet.

Just then the train lurched. She lost her balance and toppled into his arms. She hung tightly to his shoulders until able to right herself then pushed back. His hand lingered on her waist. Eyes locked.

For a second—before he looked away—Sandy saw something different. Something she'd never seen in the eyes of any other boy or man, including Buddy Nightingale. But what was it?

The train slowed, and Harry stooped, looking out the window. "Guess we're pulling into Dallas." He retrieved a watch attached to his pocket by a silver chain and glanced at it. "We're due into Union Station in about fifteen minutes."

"Well, Mister Prescott." Why was she so disappointed? "I'm afraid it's goodbye then."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going on to Dennison."

He stood awkwardly as if deciding what to do next. "Stay in Dallas. The Executive Secretary School here is second to none. Dad hires all the company's secretaries from them." His expression took on one of desperation.

"But I wouldn't have anywhere to stay, and besides, my uncle agreed to loan me tuition. I don't have—"

"I'll pay. Even get you your own place. I mean . . ."

She backed away. "What?" She held out her hand to keep him at arm's length. "Look, my aunt and uncle are expecting me."

"Please, Sandy. You don't understand. I know we've only just met, but..." He stepped toward her.

She matched his advancement, only in reverse. "Harry. I don't know how you can say such a thing after one afternoon. I may be a country girl, but I'm not stupid."

He stopped and held his hands up. "What's your uncle's name?"

"Leland Sandifer."

"Okay. You go on to Dennison and your business school." He pursed his lips deep in thought. "But I do love you, and I intend to prove my intentions are honorable. Someday, Sandra Louise Harris, you'll be my wife."

Chapter Twenty-nine



F

rom Arkansas, Buddy eased down to Austin.

He stopped by to check his post office box. Invitations from five more churches waited. In a rented room, he spread the letters out on the bed and studied them. Great to be wanted.

“Which one, Lord?”

No answer came right away, but when he stood and moved away from the bed, got a different angle, one stood out somehow. Though an ordinary white envelope like the rest, it almost glowed. He turned toward the room’s only window.

The heavy drapes, tightly closed, held back any rays of afternoon sun. No little holes. Back on the bed, one invitation still seemed brighter than the rest.

Buddy picked it up. “Is this where you want me to go, Lord?”

The return address indicated a Holiness Church in Dalton, Georgia. He re-read the short note from a man named Frank. With a silent nod, he decided. Couldn’t say why or how, but he was certain he needed to go to Dalton.

They didn’t want him until the first Sunday in September, so he could meander across the southern states. Since he could remember, Buddy hated the way his old man always hurried to the next meeting town.

Not him.

A hundred miles a day would get him there in plenty of time.

Newspapers splashed all about Hitler’s Storm Troopers rolling into Poland the day Buddy crossed Georgia’s state line. The invasion proved the talk of the day, but he wasn’t too concerned. They’d been fighting over there for thousands of years.

His concerns focused on Sandy; the rightness of their being together. How he was going to handle her father. Maybe God would just smite the old goat like Nabal. If only things had worked out. He missed her so.

That first September Sunday in '39 found him six miles outside Dalton in one of the nicest rural churches he'd ever been in.

Built from native stone, it was picture postcard perfect. The steeple, guarded by two grand magnolias, rose just above the tops of ancient pines around the little cemetery out back.

Magnificent white blossoms covered the faithful guards on either side of the wide sidewalk and lent a fragrance to the property no French perfume could match.

And bless the Lord, padded pews. Even softer than those at the Catholic church he'd visited in New York City. To top it all, they had stained glass windows. He loved stained glass. Sun shining through the colored panes made him want to dance.

Bees swarmed his heart. The Laurel Lane Holiness Church service was starting. The packed sanctuary buzzed with expectation. Frank Baxter, the senior deacon, made the introductions.

Marching to the podium, he shouted, "Bless the Lord!" He cupped his ear. The congregation echoed him. He loved it. Church was where he belonged.

"I guess you've all heard about Germany marching on Poland." Nods and murmurs moved through the building. "At first, I didn't think much about it. They've been fighting over there forever." A cold chill raced up his spine.

"But last night, the Lord showed me something horrible." He stepped around the podium and swept the room with his eyes. "American and British soldiers were landing on a beach, and the Germans were killing our boys left and right.

"I believe what I saw was from God." He shook his head. "I don't know when or how, but I think the Lord was showing me. This war will affect us. Y'all ask Him how to pray, cause only He can stop this thing before it drags in the United States."

Amens filled the church. Buddy launched into his sermon. He'd spent most of the wee hours researching what the Bible said about war and the evils thereof.

Well within the allotted time, he wrapped it all up, but not before he noticed one particular young lady. A slim redhead with a wave of freckles over her nose and a very nice pink sweater.

Very nice. Though he hated his eyes for noticing.

Why, Lord? You knew she'd be here.

Soon enough, he found out she happened to be Baxter's only daughter.

Mercy, Lord, why couldn't Sandy be here?

They'd wanted him, and it seemed so right.

The first three nights, different church members put Buddy up. On the fourth, he went to Deacon Baxter's home. The whole family simply wouldn't hear of him staying anywhere else for the rest of his visit.

Mercy.

For Buddy, the arrangement couldn't have been worse. Improper images of Miss Baxter tortured him for days. Though he tried to take them captive and call them into obedience, lustful thoughts practically drove him mad.

Determined, he resolved not to seduce her.

At any given church, standard operating procedure dictated he preach one week, two at most, but the Laurel Lane congregation took to Buddy from the start, like kids to a circus. Attendance increased every night.

Even the offerings picked up considerably.

Since the little church had been without a regular pastor for almost six months, they convinced him to stay a while.

An easy routine established itself; holding services late into the night, sleeping past noon, then lolling the afternoon away on the Baxter's front porch. Late one night, about a month into his stay, it struck him.

Maybe he should stay in Dalton.

The idea fermented while he waited for sleep. A life in sleepy little Dalton, traveling to other churches to preach revivals, always a home to return to . . . it appealed to him. Home . . .

Could Dalton replace Sandy?

The next afternoon out on the Baxter's porch, the notion of staying still occupied his thoughts. Bam. The screen door's slam jarred him. He looked up. Abigail, the lovely redhead, winced and mouthed an apology.

Her green eyes sparkled. Behind her freckled face, haloed by rebellious stray curls, a long red ponytail swung side to side as she walked toward him with a glass in each hand.

"Would you care for some lemonade, Reverend Nightingale?" She teased with a playful exaggerated drawl. "Mama's frying up chicken for dinner. You gettin' hungry?"

"I'm not a reverend, Miss Abigail." He took the offering, his fingers touched hers.

"I'd never turn down your mama's fried chicken." He leaned back, lifting the front two chair legs off the floor, and drank down half the lemonade. "Anyone ever told you how pretty you are?"

"Only Daddy." Abigail smiled then whirled into the chair next to his. Her ponytail flipped to the front and curled around her breast.

Silence lingered. "Ever been in love, Buddy?"

He laughed, hoping to conceal the vision of Sandy that flashed across his mind's eye. "That's an awfully personal question, young lady. Why do you ask?"

"Why? Because I'm in love, and it's wonderful! I've been in love for a month now."

His eyebrows raised. "I see. In love, are you?" He studied her more closely. "You sure a thirty whole days are long enough to know? For certain? If you'd asked me, I'd say you ought to give it more time."

A crow flew by and cawed. Her eyes followed its flight while her face reddened so that her freckles virtually disappeared. Without looking away from the cloudless sky, she slipped her hand onto his.

The two front chair legs came down to the floor with a smack. His pulse quickened. Familiar signs. In spite of his solemn resolve, he'd been watching her from day one.

Watching was no sin.

"I'm so afraid I don't have much more time." She stared into his eyes. "With the new preacher coming, you'll up and leave Dalton any day now, won't you? Tell the truth. And I've got to tell you how I feel before you skedaddle."

"Sweet Abigail."

With the most adorable half smile, she filled her lungs. "Buddy Nightingale, I love you. You know I do. I really do. So much it hurts. And don't you dare say I don't either."

He contemplated her. Abigail was cute as a button, pretty enough. But she wasn't Sandy. And he didn't love her. Images from the devil went un-rebuked and in the instant, conquered his resolve. He couldn't help himself.

"And exactly what you think we should do about you loving me so bad it hurts?"

She bit her bottom lip and held her breath a moment. "Why, I think we should get married right away, of course."

"Married?" He laughed. Not the answer he expected, but it did have possibilities. "You sure don't beat around the bush, do you, little girl?"

"I am not a little girl, and if you say you haven't noticed, then you're lying. I've caught you." She turned her chair to face him and took both his hands. "I figure if you're looking, you're at least a little interested. But you don't even have to love me. Not at first. I swear, I've got enough love for both of us."

"True." He smiled. "I noticed you right away. First night, matter of fact, but I guessed you were around fifteen, sixteen at the most." Maybe divine providence was at work here. God did send him to Dalton, of that, he was sure.

"I'll have you know I turn eighteen in February. Mama married Daddy when she was barely sixteen. Besides, in the Bible didn't older men always marry young girls? I mean it's only eight years difference."

"Is that all?"

"I know I'm right for you, Buddy. Can't you feel it, too? The Bible says it's a good thing for a man to find a wife. I'll make you a good wife. I promise I will."

"You sure sound certain." Still a little flabbergasted he even contemplated marrying this girl, Sandy's face flashed in his mind's eye. How could he even think about it? But strangely enough, it did seem right.

Actually, marrying Abigail might solve a lot of his problems.

She raised out of her chair and leaned over him, her hands on his shoulders. Her breath was minty. After brushing her cheek against his, she stared into his eyes, then kissed him softly full on the mouth.

"Yes," she whispered with a nibble of his earlobe. "Say yes. I've never been so sure of anything as I am of loving you. Everything will be perfect. There's been nothing on my mind but you, Buddy. Nothing since the first time I laid eyes on you."

Holding her chin gently, he returned her kiss. "You pulled the rug out from under me. I don't know what to say." John Harris' angry face snarled at him. "What about your dad?"

"Oh, he already knows. I told him and mama the first night that you were the man I was going to marry. They know how I am when my mind is set, and they both like you fine. He'd never object. You know that."

He grinned. She did have a way. Shame she couldn't be his angel, but Sandy's old man would never agree to them getting married. Maybe Baxter wouldn't either if he caught him with his daughter in the barn.

At least with Abigail, religion wouldn't be a problem. The Bible said not to unequally yoke yourself. Maybe it hadn't been God, but his own lustful flesh that drew him to Sandy. A wife was what he needed, even the old man had said as much.

"What if I'm of a different mind? Or stayed a few days then moved on?" he teased as he brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"Why, I would never have let you. You're the man God made for me. I've been waiting for you all my life, Buddy, and I would follow you around forever, do whatever I had to do until you saw things my way." She smiled her mischievous grin. The drawl returned. "You never stood a chance, Preacher."

He playfully yanked her ponytail. "And do you always get what you want?"

She sat down in his lap and wrapped an arm around his neck.
“Not always, but pretty near.”

“Well, so do I, and right now what I want is another kiss.” He kissed her. Their lips lingered. She pressed into his chest. Buddy resisted the urge to put his hands where they didn't belong. He could wait.

She leaned back looking him dead in the eyes. “I do love you, Buddy.”

“I know, baby,” he whispered then he kissed her again lightly. “I know.”

“Will you marry me, Reverend Nightingale?”

“I'll think on it.”

Chapter Thirty



Fall, 1939



hat was Buddy to do?

Trying to talk himself into marrying Abigail, his comfortable routine changed.

Though he'd suspected it, the new pastor's arrival rocked him anyway. Laurel Lane's new man decided the church only needed one doing the preaching.

Too soon for Buddy, Dalton's revival ended. The crowds had dwindled anyway, and the money river ran dry.

"Being a Christian isn't a sprint, Buddy," the older man explained. "Just can't have church every night. Folks have chores and jobs to tend to."

Buddy wanted to argue, but care of the little congregation belonged to Reverend Campbell now. "You've got a point."

A gloomy shadow settled over Buddy. With each passing day, the mood darkened. His flesh begged for what it should not have.

Nights were worst. He wanted Sandy, but she wasn't there. Abby was. She'd taken to bumping and touching that was about to drive him insane. The deacon's daughter plagued his dreams.

What he ought to do was take her on a long walk and... No. Definitely should not do that. But . . . how delicious she would be.

Midway through October, he reached a decision. He drove to the deacon's office in downtown Dalton. Ushered in with smiles and pats on the back, he sank into the overstuffed seat offered, filling his lungs then holding the breath.

The old man sure had taste. Oak desk, matching leather chairs,

and one whole wall full of books. He exhaled. "Frank, I've decided I need to take a little trip."

A frown furrowed the deacon's brow. He leaned back in his chair. "Oh, yeah? Where would you be going?"

"I've got a post office box in Austin. Planning on checking my mail and closing out my bank account there. Seems to me Dalton's where the Lord's leading me to home base."

The brow smoothed as the corners of his lips curled. "Hot dog. I couldn't have picked a better man for her." Frank rubbed his hands together. "So when's the wedding, son?"

"Haven't decided yet."

The big smile vanished. "Might I ask why?"

"Sure you can ask." Buddy shrugged. "But I won't have an answer. I don't know myself." He stood. "I plan on being gone about a week. Tell Abigail for me."

A boisterous laugh erupted. "When it comes to women," the deacon caught his breath, "are all men cowards?"

On his way west, Buddy pondered the question. Was he a coward? He didn't think so, but he really couldn't be sure. Never been in a fight, though the prospect didn't frighten him. Opportunity just never presented itself.

Surely Frank just missed the point about telling Abby. Buddy didn't want to give her the opportunity to extract any promises. Just because he planned to be gone a week didn't mean he would return in seven days.

Who knew how long he'd be gone? Or even if he'd come back at all.

"Oh Lord, what should I do?"

Nothing.

Why wasn't God talking to him?

Maybe he just wasn't listening right. Buddy wished he knew, or better yet, that the Holy Ghost would send him a letter. Yeah. Detailed instructions in writing would be the ticket.

A dozen miles down the road, it struck him. God had written him a letter. Sixty-six as a matter of fact. Put them in a book. He picked up his well-worn Bible from the seat beside him.

"It's all in here, isn't it, Lord?"

Still no audible voice, but he didn't need that. He held all the answers in his hand.

The closer he got to Austin, the more his mood brightened, as though the Texas sun chased those perplexing shadows away. He figured out what to do. At the post office, three more invitations confirmed his decision.

The form to have his mail forwarded to Georgia was completed

and turned in, then he went by his bank. At the last minute, he decided to leave a hundred dollars on account.

He stayed a whole extra day in Austin. If wrong about returning to Dalton, he wanted to give the Lord a chance to bring Sandy back into his life. He wandered the capital's streets searching every face.

A nice fantasy, but in his gut, he knew she was lost to him forever. Night fell. Fine. It was settled. He didn't wait for morning; just hightailed it back to Dalton and Abigail Baxter.

Six weeks later, the famed Eli Everman married Abigail Francis Baxter to Broderick Eversole Nightingale. Seemed he had been a personal friend of the deacon for years.

A big deal, Everman quoted scripture more than he talked and told some fascinating stories about what God had done in some of his meetings. Buddy took to him like a kid to a pup.

All the Pentecostals from miles around flocked to the ceremony to hear the silver-tongued evangelist and pay their respects to one of the most prestigious families in the denomination.

The first eight months sped by for the newlyweds. Whenever Buddy held a revival, he took Abby along. She loved sitting on the front pew, cheering him on with her hearty amens.

Money never posed a problem, thanks not only to full offering plates, but the deacon's generosity. They lived rent free in his parents' old home place, and for a wedding present, the Baxters had furnished it.

Of course, they took most their meals at Mama Baxter's table. Buddy wouldn't think of offending his new mother-in-law by refusing her hospitality. Besides, she'd never taught her daughter to boil water, and she hated to cook just for herself and the deacon.

Troubles started when a church in Tennessee sent Buddy an invitation to hold a two-week revival. The newlyweds sparred around the issue for two days without getting the matter settled.

The second night as Buddy turned off the light and slipped into bed, the sparring got serious.

"Forget it, Buddy." Abigail scooted her ever-blossoming belly to the bed's edge and clutched the covers under her chin.

"What are you saying, girl? Forget what? I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to."

"Okay. Maybe I was thinking about loving on you a little. Didn't the doctor say it'd be fine for at least another month?" Buddy hoped he put the right amount of need in his voice without sounding desperate. Not that he was, not yet anyway.

"Being seven months pregnant doesn't have a thing to do with it. I swear you won't touch me again until you write those folks in Tennessee and tell 'em you're not coming."

“Oh, I see.” He sprang out of the bed. “Well then, have it your way.” He flipped on the light, and gathered his clothes. Abigail rolled over and sat up.

“What in the world are you doing now?”

“Why,” he mocked her drawl, “going to the post office, of course, to mail my letter.”

She smiled. “Oh, silly. You don't have to go tonight. Write the letter in the morning, and I'll post it.” She extended her arms. “I love you so much, Buddy. Now come on back to bed.”

He slipped on his undershirt then stepped into his trousers. “No, little darlin'. I'll be going to the post office tonight.”

“But why?” Her victorious smile changed to a puzzled frown then a seductive grin. “I'll give you what you want now.”

He finished buttoning his shirt. “No. Need to get that letter in the mail. I'll be accepting their gracious offer, and the quicker I get it off, the better I'll feel.”

Her green eyes shot barbs. She hit the bed with her fists. “No, Buddy. Why? You know I'm not supposed to travel, and I don't want you traipsing all over the country without me. Please come on back to bed.” Her voice cracked. “Why won't you forget about going anywhere until after the baby's born so we can go with you?”

He stuffed his shirttail into his pants.

The fountain burst. “Please, Buddy.” she cried. “Don't do this.”

Shaking his head, he grabbed the keys off the dresser. “Sorry. I'm going. I don't like ultimatums. I'm the king and this is my castle.” As he turned and walked out, she sailed her pillow through the room, but it only hit the door.

“Owww!” Her painful wail caused him to open it again. A bloated picture of grace, she balanced precariously beside the bed hopping on her right foot while holding her left in both hands.

“What happened?”

“I stumped my little toe. I'm sure I broke it, Buddy. Almost tore the blasted thing off. Oh, ouch! It hurts so bad.”

“Well, sit down before you fall down, and let me take a look.”

Falling backwards onto the bed, she lifted her foot, and wiped tears from her cheeks.

Carefully, he moved the toe back and forth and examined it. “I don't think it's broken, but you might want to keep it propped up to help the throbbing.”

He picked up his pillow she had thrown and grabbed the throw pillows out of the chair while she straightened herself in the bed. He lifted her foot and stacked the pillows under it. Once he got her settled in, he kissed her cheek. “I'm sorry you hurt your toe.”

Her bottom lip pouted. “You're not still leaving, are you?”

“Afraid so. Gotta get that letter in the mail, you know.”

As he closed the door the second time, she screamed. “Don't you dare leave this house, Buddy Nightingale! You'll be sorry if you do!”

He ignored her. Preaching revivals was what he did, and no one, especially the deacon's spoiled brat, dictated when or where he preached.

The next two weeks, Abigail obviously did everything she could think of to get him to change his mind. As a last resort, even made love to him, but his mind was set. When the time came to leave, he drove away with her screaming from the road.

God blessed him at the Tennessee meeting.

Rather uneventful so far as salvations went, but the offerings . . . he'd never seen a collection plate so stuffed night after night. Even with the residing pastor's usual split, Buddy headed home with over eighteen hundred dollars.

He steered his old Ford into their gravel drive and honked. Certain Abigail would still be mad, he'd stopped on the way for a peace offering, a new pink dress for after the baby, and a matching hat.

His wife loved wide-brimmed hats and anything new, especially if it was pink. After honking again, he hurried to the trunk of the car and retrieved his cardboard suitcase. Needed to find himself something better, not too flashy, but better than cardboard.

After all, he could afford it.

Still thinking about how to spend his money, he went in. “Abby?” The house was silent... and empty. He wandered through, gawking at the bare rooms.

Everything was gone, except for his clothes hanging in the open closet and their old bed. He showered, changed, then headed straight for the Baxter's.

Though modest by comparison to many Savannah or Atlanta mansions, the Baxter's estate far exceeded Dalton's standards. Built during the depression with cheap labor and extravagant materials that cost ten cents on the dollar, the home did the deacon proud, but why not?

While most had thought the good times would last forever, Baxter foresaw the Depression and prepared. Having the only cotton gin in sixty miles hadn't hurt, but frugality and ready cash increased his wealth during a time when most Americans suffered.

Once drawn by the family's opulence, Buddy ignored it, strolling up their familiar front walk. Since the marriage, he'd just walked in. That night, he knocked. Frank opened the enormous leaded glass door.

“Abigail here?”

The deacon stepped through the screen door then eased both

doors shut. "Where in the world have you been, Buddy?"

"Didn't she tell you? I went to a meeting in Tennessee. Where is she?"

"In bed."

He started around Baxter. "What's she doing here? Why's the house empty?"

The older man grabbed his arm. "You're not going in." Baxter squeezed hard. "I don't know what's going on between you two, but she almost lost the baby. Doc says she has to stay in bed until it comes."

Stepping back, he stared at his father-in-law. The announcement sunk in. "When? What happened?"

"Almost two weeks ago. She came here bawling her eyes out about you running out on her. That night, she started bleeding and . . . Well, I didn't ask a lot of questions . . . women stuff, you know. Been in bed since, and Doc says she's supposed to stay calm."

"I want to see her."

At first, Baxter stared at him, too long, then nodded. "All right, as long as you don't upset her."

On eggshells, he tiptoed through the house to her old room then pushed the door open and stuck his head in. A clean floral fragrance filled the air. She looked so child-like in the big four-poster bed.

"Abby? Baby? You all right?"

She raised her head and smiled. "Buddy, you've come home." The victor's I-told-you-so glint in her eyes turned what sympathy and remorse he had to disgust.

"Sorry you had trouble while I was gone."

"Oh, I'll be fine." She held out her arms. "Especially now that you're home to stay."

The impulse to turn right around and leave again softened. She carried his baby, and God hated divorce. Holiness folks hardly abided it, but particularly in the pulpit.

"I really am sorry." He pressed his cheek to hers.

Reap what you sow.

He'd rushed in like a fool where angels fear to tread.

Chapter Thirty-one



Fall, 1940



Nathaniel folded the letter and slipped it into his desk.

Grandfather. It had a nice ring. Bless the Lord, Buddy was a father. He'd have to get himself to Georgia one of these days and see his granddaughter.

The sound of tires crunching gravel pulled his thoughts from his son. He strolled out to the porch, preferring to take visitors there.

A large gray-haired man walked the stone path alongside the church building. He emerged from the shadow. "Well, I'll be. Captain Carpenter."

The man stopped. "That you, padre?"

"Sure is." Nathaniel hurried toward his friend. Carpenter's pace also quickened. "What in the world brings you to Pine Bluff?" They met halfway, hugged briefly slapping each other's backs, then shook hands.

"Came out to the sticks just to see you, Preacher. And it's Colonel, I'll have you know." His old army buddy's face split into a wide grin.

"That so?" Nathaniel led his friend to the porch. "You'll never guess who lives down the road." The Colonel shrugged. "Sergeant Harris."

"Johnny Boy? You're kidding."

"Nope. Last Fourth of July I got to visit with him for half the afternoon."

"Well, I'll be. Guess it is a small world."

"Yeah, I thought it was something when I found out it was him." Nathaniel studied his friend a minute. A pain lurked in the man's eyes.

“So what really brings you to Pine Bluff?”

Carpenter glanced over his shoulder toward his car, then stared at the floor. “It’s my son.”

Nathaniel nodded. Best to let a man tell what was on his mind in his own way.

“I’ve been ordered to the Philippines, and Jac—that’s my boy—he’s supposed to stay with my sister.” Carpenter stopped. Nathaniel held his tongue. Not time to ask questions yet.

The silence hung for a moment more, then Carpenter wiped his hand over his face.

“I’ve tried everything, but the boy will not stop fighting.” Carpenter shook his head. “I think maybe he’s got one of those demons you used to talk about.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Ever since first grade, he’s been fighting. Every time, every single time, I whipped him double whatever they gave him at school, but nothing stops him. Last week he got himself expelled. He’s only nine. I hate leaving him, but I don’t have a choice.”

“Where’s the boy now?”

“Out in the car.”

Nathaniel stood then pulled the man to his feet. “Well, come introduce me.”



Jac watched until his father and the preacher headed his direction. He didn’t need any country bumpkin preacher. There wasn’t anything wrong with him. The Colonel just didn’t get it. The men reached the car.

“Jac, come here.”

“Yes, sir.” He opened the door and extended his hand. “Glad to meet you, sir.”

The preacher shook then hung on. “Pleasure’s mine. Your dad and I went through a lot together in the war. Name’s Nathaniel Nightingale.”

“I know.”

Nightingale let go and stepped away. “Walk with me a while, Jac.”

He turned toward his father. “Sir?”

“Sure, go on, Son. I’ll stay here.”

The preacher walked toward the road. Jac followed behind. The old fellow seemed nice enough. Wouldn’t hurt taking a walk. “Where we going?”

“Across the road a little piece. There’s a spring about a half mile.

I'm real partial to its water."

Nightingale crossed the road, ducked under the top strand of barbed wire stepping over the bottom two, and headed toward some woods without looking back. Jac liked his easy manner.

Shame the Colonel wasn't so easygoing.

The preacher followed a footpath for a hundred paces then sat down on a large flat rock that hung out over a pool. Jac joined him.

"Here, try this." Nightingale extended a tin cup half full of water.

Jac took the cup and held it to his nose. He wasn't drinking anything he didn't smell first, but the water was odorless. He sipped it, then tilting the cup, emptied it.

"You're right. That water's especially good."

The preacher took the cup, dipped it in the little pool at his feet, then emptied it himself. "So, what's your story, Jac?"

"No story, sir."

"That's not your father's take."

Jac stiffened his back. "Sir, John Austin Carpenter." He saluted. "Sir."

"Little young to be in the Army, aren't you?"

"No, sir. Not according to the Colonel, sir."

"I get your point, Jac. Let's cut the bull. Why have you been getting into so many fights?"

"Self defense."

"You didn't start any of them?"

"No, sir. I never throw the first punch, just the last. That's why they all keep coming. Everyone wants a piece of the great man's son."

"You ever think about turning the other cheek?"

"You got to be kidding."

The old fellow nodded. "So you were in the war with Dad?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was he really a hero? Or was that just a crock of—" He looked up and grinned. "Bull?"

"I didn't see it but talked to plenty of men who did. He's a sure-fire hero all right."

That's what they all said. Jac almost wished it wasn't true. Wished he had a regular father, not a Medal of Honor winner. "You were the chaplain?"

"That's a fact."

"So you didn't have to fight?"

The preacher laughed. "You sure ask a lot of questions."

"Why not? The Colonel sure doesn't talk about the war. Like he'd be bragging or something. I want to know how he felt about killing all those Germans. Hell, he's never even let me see his medal."

"You sure like those French words."

“Sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t cuss, especially now that I get to stay with Aunt Sissy.”

“How do you feel about that?”

Jac shrugged. “She’s nice enough.”

“What do you think about God?”

The rock suddenly got way too hard. A piece of driftwood caught his eye. Jac walked over and picked it up. “I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“He don’t bother me, and I don’t bother Him. What’s to think about?”

“Jesus?”

Jac laughed. “Look, I don’t turn my other cheek or take anything off anyone. From what I’ve seen of Christians and heard about your Bible—” He chunked the branch into the water. “Let’s just say it’s not for me.”

Nightingale stood. “Want any more water?”

“No, sir.”

“Son, you’ve got a heavy load. You need to give your life to Jesus, let him set you free.”

Jac laughed again. What a joke. He was about to be free, soon as the Colonel shipped out. “So you don’t think I’m eat up with the devil?”

“No, you need to concentrate on finding the Lord. His love’s unconditional, Jac. If there’s anything wrong with you, He’ll let you know.” Nightingale held out his hand. “Don’t you want to give your life to Jesus?”

He liked this guy real well. Shame he was a Bible thumper. Jac shook his head. “Sorry, don’t think so.”

“It’s your choice, son. But I’m the one who’s sorry.” He nodded toward the church. “Come on, your dad’s waiting.”



Colonel Carpenter searched his son’s face as the boy crossed the road. His son looked the same. He didn’t know what he expected, but he didn’t see any difference. Jac stopped beside the car and waited for Nightingale to catch up.

The boy stuck out his hand. “Good to meet you, Sir. That was some mighty fine tasting water you got.”

Nightingale shook his hand. “Come back anytime, Jac.”

“Wait in the car, Son. I won’t be long.”

“Yes, sir.”

Carpenter walked Nightingale back to the porch. He hoped he

hadn't driven seventy-five miles for nothing. "Well, you get anywhere with the kid?"

"Yes and no."

"What's that mean?" He knew he was grabbing at straws, but Nightingale was his only hope.

The preacher lowered himself slowly into the rocker. "Well, I don't believe the boy's demon possessed, if that makes you feel any better."

"Then what in the devil's wrong with him?"

"You want the truth?"

"Sure I do."

The chaplain pointed at a cane-bottom chair. "Sit a minute."

Carpenter obeyed. "So what's the problem?"

"You."

"Me? What in Hades you getting at?"

"The boy's trying to live up to what you are, were, will be. He's all mixed up about what it takes to be brave. Wants to measure up to his old man."

"He told you that?"

"Not in so many words, but that's what it is. He wants you to be proud of him. Fights 'cause he wants to show you how tough he is."

"He's sure going about it the wrong way. You ask him why he comes out swinging all the time?"

"Claims self defense."

"Same old story."

"There may be some truth to it."

"I doubt it. I've seen some of the boys he's beaten. I can't imagine anyone would pick a fight with Jac. There's got to be more to it than just trying to impress me."

The preacher nodded then looked off into the distance for a minute before locking onto Carpenter's eyes. "Do you recall a conversation we had in that French bordello?"

"I remember you preaching Jesus to all those whores. How could I forget? Didn't get a tumble for a week after you filled 'em full of guilt."

"Well, what I said that night to those ladies, and to you, applies to Jac as well. You'll never be at peace without Jesus."

Chapter Thirty-two



Summer, 1942

ould the war ever be over?

Sandy scanned the Dallas Morning News and sipped coffee on the porch. She loved watching the ducks waddle along the banks of Turtle Creek; such a serene view. It calmed her soul.

The August morning broke still and quiet, in direct contradiction to the news on the radio or in the papers. Seemed like nothing went well for the Allies. She took another sip, determined not to think about the war, but how could she not think about a world gone mad?

Why were men so stupid to kill each other?

A group of ducks took to the water. They glided across the smooth water, leaving a rippling 'V' in their wake. Those on the bank chased each other and pecked through the thick grass, quacking as they went.

She liked watching the half-tamed birds before the city woke up, but the thought of real sugar in her coffee was what got her up so early. Rotten rationing. She hated the war.

"Good morning, Sandy. Sleep well?"

She swiveled her chair and smiled. Harry filled the porch's doorway. "Morning yourself."

He stepped in front of her. Weeping willows and the far bank's thick ferns silhouetted him. She chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"The whole morning. I can't believe your backyard is so beautiful, and you look like one of those models in a magazine. I guess I'm just laughing to keep from crying over this war."

His thin lips spread into a broad smile. "I know how you feel. Life

isn't fair."

She poured him a cup of coffee. "So, what's up, and where is everyone else? All the other rooms were empty when I got in last night."

"You're the only one I invited."

"Harry." She scooted up in her chair. "Why'd you do that?"

"There's something I want only you to hear first."

"What would that be?"

"That I've named you my beneficiary."

"Oh, Harry. Why?"

"I've accepted a Naval commission."

In the nine months since the attack on Pearl Harbor, more and more of their social group had joined the war effort. Harry was the last one she ever thought she'd see go marching off to some God-forsaken place.

Sons of rich men didn't fight wars.

"That's insane." She searched his eyes for some explanation.

"You're not the Navy type."

"Oh, I'm the Navy type all right." He saluted. "Lieutenant Commander Harrison Prescott at your service, ma'am."

"I can't believe it. This is all so unreal. Why can't it stay the same? Be like it used to. I'll miss you, Harry."

He kissed her cheek. "Not half as much as I'll miss you."

They spent the rest of the morning sipping sweet coffee and watching the ducks. Sandy knew why he named her in his will and why he always invited her and her friends to his father's mansion.

Shame he wasn't Buddy. Harry was handsome enough and his money sure didn't hurt her feelings any. That afternoon after a going-away dinner at the Adolphus, he drove her to the train station.

"I don't have to report till Tuesday." He pulled up to Union Station and turned toward her. "Why don't you stay over?"

"Unlike some people, I have to work tomorrow."

"You really don't, you know."

"Yes, but I really do." She leaned over, pecked his cheek, then ran inside without looking back.

A one-way ticket to Dennison in her hand, she shouldered her way through the throng of travelers toward the boarding dock then stepped outside. The raised concrete platform was almost as crowded.

The normal ranks of sojourners, swelled by large numbers of uniformed men, milled about talking in hushed tones. The myriad of quiet voices created a collective buzz, like a giant horsefly.

Though she searched for a seat or someone gentlemanly enough to offer his, she found neither so settled for a wall to lean against. She dug in her purse for a Lucky Strike, lit it with her twenty-four carat

lighter, then studied her engraved initials.

Harry always wanted to buy her expensive gifts. That had been one of the few she'd accepted.

"If only I could feel for him like I—" She stopped herself. A thousand times, no a million, she resolved to put Buddy out of her thoughts, get over him once and for all. "After three years, you'd think . . ." She sighed then looked around.

No one heard. Sucking hard on the cigarette, she closed her eyes and willed her mind blank.

"Hello, Sandy."

That voice!

She spun around. Buddy Nightingale, dressed in a drab green uniform stood only a step away. The half-smoked Lucky slipped from her fingers. Her heart raced, flipped over into her stomach, then skipped a beat. She swallowed.

Her first-love grinned the same infectious smile that haunted her dreams. Suddenly, a raging anger rose. Her pounding heart sent a rush of hot blood to her cheeks. Without thinking, she swung her open hand toward his mouth.

Just before impact, his smile faded. She regretted her action too late. Her palm connected squarely. His head jerked sideways. His eyes watered, and his mouth hung slack jawed.

With a bewildered expression, he rubbed his jaw, working the joint.

Grabbing his arm, she pulled herself to him and kissed the red outline of her hand. "I'm sorry, Buddy." She kissed him again then leaned back. "Why? Why didn't you come back for me?"

"Your Papa almost killed me, angel. Had me strung up. If your mother hadn't stopped him, he would have hung me for sure. I didn't want to cause you any more trouble or get myself killed. He hates me."

Sandy stared into his eyes. Papa would have killed him if he'd come back. Sometimes she hated John Robert Harris. Things could have been so different. Three years of resentment and frustration melted away. She gently touched the reddened skin at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh how I love you, Buddy Nightingale. I've always loved you."

Kissing her, he covered her hand with his. "Come on." He pulled her through the crowded station. Sandy's better judgment screamed 'Don't go,' but she let him pull her out the depot's front door.

Where was he taking her? She'd miss her train.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her across Houston Street to the Browder House, one of Dallas' more modest hotels. The turn of the century brick and granite structure catered

mostly to rail travelers.

Right through the lobby and into the elevator, Buddy hustled her up to the second story. While he fitted his key into the lock of room 208, she considered running. Once inside that room, she'd never be the same.

The door swung open and Buddy stepped back. His eyes twinkled, and he smiled that smile.

Better judgment succumbed to longing. She loved him, had wanted him all those years, and she intended to have him. Sandy stepped in. Buddy followed then spread his arms wide. She surrendered all falling into his embrace.

"Oh, Buddy. I love you so much."

"I know, baby." He flicked the door shut with his foot.



Buddy couldn't help himself. Everything in him told him he shouldn't be there. Not with Sandy. But from the moment he spotted her walking through the depot, he knew where they would spend the night.

The woman belonged to him, had from the moment he first saw her. He'd never forget the sparkles all around her. God knew it, too. It was a sign.

Slowly, he undressed her. His angel. Her smooth milky skin shivered under his touch. He did love her, had always loved her. If only things had been different. He carried her to the bed.

Savoring every minute, he at last finished what he started so long ago in that abandoned barn.

For the longest, they cuddled entwined in each other's arms. He propped himself on an elbow. "Want a drink?" She nodded. Slipping out of bed, he filled two glasses with water. "Sorry, but that's all I have."

She sat up and pointed at her pile of clothes. "In my purse there's a flask. And get my cigarettes, please."

He set the glasses on the bedside table, found her purse, then handed it over. A totally satisfied smile curled her mouth. "What's the matter with you?"

"Some things men aren't meant to do. Rummaging around a woman's purse is one of them."

"Oh, is that right?" She pulled out a gold flask and her pack of Luckies.

Something about that picture wasn't right. "Sandra Louise, when did you start smoking and drinking?"

“Right after you left.” She took a sip, then handed him the flask. “Peppermint Schnapps. Purely medicinal, of course. It’s good for what ails you.”

He smelled it, then tossed back a shot. It burned all the way down. After lighting a cigarette, she handed him the pack. “Why not?”

“How do you stand these things?”

“It’s an acquired taste.”

He crushed his out. “Where were you going?”

“Back to Dennison. I have to work tomorrow.” She pulled her legs under herself and faced him. “What about tomorrow, Buddy? And the day after?”

“I’ve got to be in Galveston day after tomorrow. They’re shipping me out.”

She shook her head. “But I just found you! And . . . and now— you’re leaving? Can’t you do something?”

“I filed as a conscientious objector, but they drafted me anyway. Made me a medic. Nothing I could do.”

Slipping off the bed, she knelt in front of him, laid her head in his lap, and hugged him. “I can’t live another day without you, Buddy.”

“I know, baby.” He stroked her head. “But at least we’ll have tonight and tomorrow.”

She raised her head and stared into his eyes. “Marry me, Buddy. Let’s get married before you go.”

Mercy, how could he tell her? “There’s no time. It takes thirty days and a ton of paper work.”

More than anything that minute, he wanted to look away, but she’d know something was wrong. “Well then, promise me.”

“Promise you what?”

“That you’ll come home to me, safe and sound.”

“Of course, baby. You know I will.” He pressed his lips to hers. His hands slid down over her ribs to her hips. He stood, lifting her to her feet. “Just as soon as this thing’s over, I’ll come get you, baby.”

“I love you, Buddy.”

“You know I love you too, baby.” He nuzzled her neck. “You know, don’t you?” He hated himself, but what could he do? She was his angel.

Chapter Thirty-three



Spring, 1944



alking to his barracks, Buddy read Sandy's letter.

His building looked like all the others, but after six months, he could have found it blindfolded. The late afternoon still held a chill, but what spring afternoon didn't in England?

Oh, how he wished he could be anywhere but there, and that it could be any other but then. Once inside, he finished the letter then tucked it with the others in his footlocker.

What was he going to do? How could he go home to Sandy with Abigail waiting in Dalton? He flopped down on his bunk, staring at the picture of his wife and daughter.

His beautiful little girl looked so much like him. He touched her face. Could he spend the rest of his life without his darling Amanda and those sparkling eyes? Every time she smiled, he saw his mother.

"Oh Lord, what am I going to do?"

"You say something, Buddy?"

He sat up and faced the man in the next bunk. "Just talking to the Lord."

"Well, while you're at it, pray the brass change their minds and let us have our liberty. We've earned it, and I've got a hot date tonight."

"Now why would I ask God to let you out of here so you can go fornicate?"

The man laughed. "'Cause it's what I need." He closed his eyes, still smiling. "Ah, my little English bird."

"No, you're mistaken there, my friend. What you need is Jesus."

“Think he can get me out of here?”

Buddy shook his head. “Why do I talk to you, Ralph? You’ve only got one thing on your mind.”

“And I suppose you don’t think about it. We’ve been here six months, and all we’ve done is train. You might be a preacher, but hey, you’re still a man. What else is there to think about?”

If he only knew. Buddy stood.

“Heaven. Eternal life?” He sighed. “You know why we’re here, and that a lot of us won’t make it home.” Buddy hesitated. He shouldn’t say anything . . .

But what did it matter since all leave had been canceled?

“I’ve seen it, Ralph. Thousands of us storming a beach, and the Germans mowing us down.”

“You kidding me? What do you mean you’ve seen it? That some of your holy roller ramblings?”

“No. I’ve had the dream for years, and it’s always the same. As far as the eye can see, I’ve seen thousands of British and American soldiers wading ashore from landing craft under a barrage of bullets and mortars.”

Ralph rolled out of his bunk, concern written across his face. “You’re really not fooling, are you?”

“I am not. The Lord showed me what was going to happen back in ’39 just after Hitler rolled into Poland. Now the vision is coming true.”

Several other men clustered around the two bunks. “So when’s it going to happen?”

Buddy searched the faces. The usual disbelief and skepticism wasn’t present, only concern. “Next week.”

“Hogwash. You can’t know that.” From the back of the impromptu gathering, someone’s scornful voice mocked him. The naysayer shoved through. “Why would General Ike tell a low life pretty boy like you when we’re going?”

Ralph glanced over his shoulder at the doubter. “Shut up, Jenkins.” He faced Buddy. “You sure? Did God really tell you we’d go next week?”

“June sixth.” Buddy nodded. “D-day.”

Jenkins balled his fist. “You idiotic holy rollin’ fanatic. How’d you like me to knock out those pearly whites? Think that would shut you up?” He moved within inches. “I say you’re full of it. You don’t know nothing.”

“I know what I saw and heard. June sixth will come soon enough, then you’ll know, won’t you? Why do you think they canceled all leave?”

The man held his fist inches from Buddy’s nose. “You’re not worth it.”

What a jerk. "Either it's true, or it isn't. Time will tell.

More questions followed, but he'd already told them everything he knew. Well, except for one small detail, that more than half would never make it off the beach.

Settling back on his bunk, he stared at the picture of Amanda and her mother. He couldn't stand the thought of not being a part of their lives, but didn't think he could live at all without Sandy. Not after Dallas.

What am I going to do, Lord? How can I have all three?

With each passing day, it became more apparent to everyone that he knew what he was talking about. The normal routine changed.

Then on the afternoon of the fifth, his battalion boarded buses headed for the London docks. His standing among the rankers also changed. No longer was he looked upon as a religious freak.

Most of his unit found opportunities to ask him to pray for them. Even Jenkins.

In the darkest hours before dawn, Buddy found himself just off the Normandy coast standing on the deck of a British transport. Ralph elbowed his way between two other men then stopped in front of him.

"You have any more dreams? Hear anything else?"

"No, my friend." He grabbed Ralph's hand and squeezed. "You keep your head down, hear?"

The boy nodded then looked toward shore, but nothing could be seen in the rolling darkness. "How'd you get yourself into this mess, Buddy? I mean, going to war without a gun. Why aren't you a chaplain or something?"

"I registered as a conscientious objector, but I'm not accredited by any faith. Medic was the only noncombatant job I thought I might be good at."

"So here you are, about to storm the beaches of Normandy, just like God showed you in the dream."

Boom!

A deafening chorus of big guns followed that first shot. Ralph pointed toward the battleship off the port bow. "Look at those babies spit fire and death. They'll soften up those no-good Krauts for us."

Buddy's gut tightened. He didn't want to be there, but it's where he was.

Oh Lord, help me through it.

With each booming salvo, his heart quickened. He wanted to run, but where? He'd always thought of himself as David, and the sweet singer of Israel didn't run away when he faced his Goliath or any other enemy.

King David proved to be a valiant warrior.

The transport steamed toward the rendezvous point, leaving the

battleship behind. Two landing craft angled toward them. It was time.

Father God, help us all.

His breath came in gasps. His chest thumped to where he thought everyone could hear, even over the bursting bombs. The early morning breeze off the ocean carried a chill, yet sweat soaked his underarms and neck.

The first landing craft reached the transport. The two ships slowed then linked up. Men crowded onto the shallow water boat. Once full, it sped toward the beach.

Dear God, have mercy. It's begun. "Father, go before us and prepare a place, subdue our enemies for Your Namesake."

The battleship's guns pounded the coast. German artilleries and small arms' fire lit the dark sky. How could anyone survive?

A melody stirred in Buddy's soul as he and the others of his platoon moved forward.

Two more loads, and it would be their turn.

The tune repeated in his head. He waited for the words. The men in front of him surged forward. One more LC. The song burned in his gut. He had to sing.

"Our Father, who art in heaven." He belted it out. "Hallowed be thy name."

Those around him caught the tune and joined in singing the Lord's Prayer. They finished it with an amen then started over as they climbed onto the landing craft. Time slowed, and Buddy's heartbeat returned to normal.

His breathing deepened. Peace filled his soul. Mortars and small arms peppered the water. Sprays of white surf broke over the sides, soaking him, but no shells or bullets found their mark aboard those on the landing craft Buddy rode.

A jolt knocked him into the man behind then the craft's front ramp slammed open. The officers and noncoms shouted orders. He righted himself then inched forward a half-step, then a full step.

The boat's edge came too soon. The living waded toward the beach amidst scores of dead soldiers floating, riding the waves. He hesitated, a hand gripped his arm.

"Come on." Ralph jumped off, pulling him into the water.

"Mercy, it's cold." He waded waist-deep toward the shore.

The GI right in front of Buddy jerked sideways then fell backwards, his face ripped to shreds. He grabbed the man's arm and pulled him along. Bodies bobbed in the surf like apples in a number three washtub.

Arms and legs floated without benefit of body. Fifty feet from the beach, Buddy released the dead private he'd been dragging. His job was tending to the living. "Oh Lord, help us all."

The smell of gunpowder and dead fish permeated the air. He reached the beach where spilled blood tinged the waves' foam a gruesome pink. A few from his unit huddled in a shallow foxhole, quickly setting up a machine gun.

They focused on a cliff two hundred yards ahead. He ran, stumbled, then crawled the thirty paces to their position. Someone handed him a shovel. "Dig, man."

He dug.

A bleeding GI crawled into his fresh hole. Buddy dropped his shovel and unloaded his pack. He busied himself patching the man's torn flesh. Finished, he looked over his shoulder. The dead and dying littered the beach like seashells.

Incoming waves only washed up more.

"Help me, Lord."

A man with a leg blown off crawled toward him. Buddy crab-crawled to the soldier and pulled him back to the relative safety of his hole. He yanked off the man's belt and wrapped it around the stump.

"Can you hold it?"

The GI nodded.

Buddy retrieved salve and applied it directly onto the mass of bloody meat where minutes before, a whole leg helped carry the poor guy to this god-forsaken beach.

A dose of morphine administered mid-thigh on the opposite leg seemed to give the soldier some relief. He had to yell to get over the noise of guns popping, grenades exploding, and men either screaming orders or for mercy.

"Gonna leave it there a minute. Let me know if this hurts."

The man nodded again, and Buddy packed gauze onto the stump until the blood stopped oozing. He scooted the man to the front of the hole then pressed the stump hard into the sand to stay the blood flow.

Lastly, he painted an M on the soldier's forehead with monkey blood so other medics wouldn't double dose the morphine. The machine gun sent a round of lead at an enemy position. He pointed to his ear, shook his head.

"That's all I can do for now."

The man grabbed Buddy's shirt sleeve and pulled him down. "Pray for me, please."

"Are you saved?"

"I don't think so."

He stuck his mouth to the GI's ear and presented the plan of salvation. "That's all you got to do, talk to Jesus. He's the one that saves you." He scooted back and looked over his shoulder.

Dozens of men needed him.

For what seemed an eternity, he slithered from one downed GI to

the next. The deafening roar faded some, but the buzz of bullets whizzing all around kept him as flat against the sand as he could get.

Missed shots caused constant showers that peppered him with stinging grit. Thank the Lord none found his flesh. The longer he worked, the less he cowered.

Then it struck him. The Lord knew the day of his death. He'd been with David against his Goliath, and with Buddy on that beach.

As the acknowledgment of God's protection worked its way into Buddy's soul, another realization hit him. He used his last shot of morphine on the armless GI he was patching, dropped his pack, and stood.

Sparklets of gold filled the sky like a million fireflies. One by one, they blinked out, leaving a golden mist suspended in the air, blocking everything from sight but the machine-gun nest perched a hundred feet or so up the steep cliff.

Bone weary, Buddy glanced skyward. "Oh Lord."

IN YOUR WEAKNESS I AM STRONG

The words spread over his soul like molasses on pancakes. "That's good, Father, because I couldn't do this alone. Keep my hands free of blood." He filled his lungs then studied his course up the rock face for a second as he walked upright toward the line of hunkered GIs.

A man grabbed at his pants as he stepped over the little hill of sand they hid behind, but Buddy pulled himself free and continued walking toward the beach line.

A part of him noticed the shouts to get-down, and the bullets all around, but neither changed anything. He would silence the guns or die. His life was in God's hands.

He negotiated the first real dune then came to the base of the almost vertical cliff. With the best route locked in his mind, he stretched out his hand and pulled. Hand over hand, he worked his way up.

Just below the crest, his feet found the ledge he'd marked as his goal.

He coiled like a cobra, but before he leapt, he gazed skyward. "Lord, bless these German soldiers with long life and knowledge of You." As he prayed, he pictured Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. "Be with me, Father."

He sprang.

His chest hit the top layer of sandbags. For a frozen moment, he hung suspended, then crashed into the nearest German, silencing his machine gun. The other merchant of death continued to spew rounds.

He scrambled to his feet and dove, catching the second gunner on his shoulder. The soldier crashed into the sandbag wall. Buddy grabbed the gun and hurled it over the cliff.

A thousand bees stung his back, knocking him off his feet. He hit the ground and rolled. An enemy soldier stood over him with a Luger. The man shouted something in German.

Buddy froze.

The two gunners leaned back, and the man squeezed the trigger.

Nothing.

The German snapped the hammer twice more with the same results, then threw the weapon at Buddy who raised his hands, deflecting the pistol. A fist slammed into his right jaw, followed by a blow to his left cheek.

The three Germans pounded on him. He could only shield himself with his crossed arm. The war disappeared along with the cries of agony and deafening roar of guns and explosions.

Standing in a peaceful meadow, he waved back at Sandy on the opposite side. He stepped toward her, then from far behind, a soldier cried for a medic. In slow motion, Buddy turned.

Cries of the dying, then a hideous chorus, stabbed his heart. He moved toward a man with a hole in his chest.

“No, Buddy. Stay with me.”

He glanced back to the meadow. Sandy held open her arms, begging him to cross the lush green grass, but he couldn't. He wasn't King David. One wife would have to do him. He'd already married the mother of his daughter, Abigail.

He looked back once more. Sandy was gone.

Just as a fuzzy darkness engulfed him, Ralph's face materialized in the inky soup, then sweet nothing carried him away.

Gently, hands shook him. “Hey, Buddy, you alive?”

At first he didn't respond. He guessed he was. A part of him wanted to be dead, longed for union with Christ and an eternity of peace, but the greater part wanted to live, complete God's plan for his life.

Rising from the nether, he opened his eyes. Pain shot from his light-drenched eyes through his swollen head and looped behind his eyes as a dull throb.

Ralph grinned. “I can't believe it. You did it, man.”

“What about the Germans?”

“What about 'em?”

“They alive?”

His friend stuck his hand under Buddy's head and lifted. The three Germans huddled in the corner with a GI guarding them.

“They're alive.”

“Good. I prayed that God would give them a long life, just before I went over the sand bags. Maybe now they will.”

“Get to praying this war's over soon.” Ralph shook his head. “I

don't ever want to go through anything like this again."

"Amen."

Chapter Thirty-four



uddy limped down the hall.

He reached the nurses' station then turned around, holding his gown shut in back. Sixty-five paces to the other end and back again. His leg protested each step, but he continued walking.

The doctor wanted five laps that day. While he walked, he rewrote the letter in his head. June thirteenth, and he still hadn't put pen to paper. But how could he tell her?

"Oh Lord. My sins have brought me low."

Searing pain shot both directions from his knee. His leg screamed to stop. He dragged the protesting appendage back to his ward. Walking-wounded filled the eleven other beds.

No one seemed to notice as he hobbled through and sank into the settee at the end of the room. He stared out the window, wishing he didn't have to hurt his angel, but for his life couldn't find the right words to spare her.

No way out.

She had to be told.

A squirrel, leaping from branch to branch, caught his eye. It scurried out of view. Buddy couldn't procrastinate any longer. He limped to his bed for his stationary then retreated to his window seat.

My dearest sweet Sandy,

*From the first time I saw you, I've been madly
in love with you. You are my angel, and I will always
love you.*

He set the pen down. All that was true. He did love her more than life, but he could never have her, and that's what he had to tell her. The evening star twinkled in the darkening sky. Breath came heavy. He wished, then, reluctantly, returned to his letter.

Sweetheart I'm sorry I haven't written sooner.

The past few days have been terrible, yet wonderful in that the Lord has made Himself more real to me than ever before. I got wounded on June sixth, the day we landed, but I'm fine now. The doctor said I would go back in a few days.

Sweetheart, there's something I've got to tell you. When I told you in Dallas that I'd come back to you after the war, I meant every word of it. But now,
"Corporal Nightingale?"

He looked up from his letter. A full colonel approached. He pushed himself to his feet and saluted. "Yes, Sir."

"Sit down, son." The colonel grabbed a chair and joined him. "Face doesn't look too bad. How's your knee?"

Swallowing a groan, he slipped back into his seat. "Getting better every day. Doc thinks I'll be ready in a week or so."

"Excellent." The man leaned forward and stared into his eyes. He stared back. "Your records indicate you volunteered to be a chaplain."

"Yes, sir, but I'm not accredited."

"Shame." The colonel laughed. "The real thing bit those pious idiots." He huffed, shook his head, then looked up and smiled.

"Anyway, how would you like being an officer?"

That was not what he expected! Buddy grinned. "No thanks, sir. I'm a noncombatant."

"That's not what the men in your unit say. According to them, you're the hero. They claim you knocked out a machine-gun nest single handed."

"No, sir, not exactly. The Lord was there with me every step of the way. He told me to go, so I had to. The Germans had us pinned down and—"

Buddy shut off his mind's eye, didn't want to remember. He'd never been more terrified in his life than that day and being labeled a hero didn't sit well. His deeds haunted him enough.

He willed his mind blank, but in the void, his angel's face waited. Sandy's image swelled his soul. No. He shook his head. He didn't want to think about her either.

"I didn't kill them, sir. I couldn't."

"I know what you did." The colonel paused. "But what's more important to me, son, is that I've received over fifty letters from men

in your battalion requesting you as their spiritual leader.”

Wow, who would have thought? Buddy leaned back and studied the colonel. “Who are you, sir?”

“Colonel Albritton.” He tapped the cross on his lapel. “Third Army Chaplain, and you can’t join my ranks unless General Bradley makes you an officer first.”

“You’re serious?”

“Wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t, Lieutenant Nightingale.”

That sounded great. He looked away. What could be better than being an officer and a gentleman? Nothing better he could think of—except being out of his romance mess, or the war to be over. He looked back.

Albritton’s eyes held no deceit, no hint of some cruel joke. He stuck out his hand. “I’d like that a lot, sir.”

The man stood. “Good. It’s settled.” He handed Buddy a card. “When they release you, come see me. I’ll have everything ready.”

He took the card then studied the colonel’s back as he walked out. Bless God. They were going to make him a full-blown chaplain. He could hold church again.

His unfinished letter called, refused to be denied. He had to get through it.

Oh Lord, go before this awful goodbye and prepare her heart.

How he hated hurting her so, but the most important thing . . . he must go on with the Lord. King David didn’t—not until he sinned no more and put away his foreign women.

His hand trembled as he inked the knife that cut out two hearts—Sandy’s and his own. Tears flowed as he signed his name and sealed his fate.

Father, give me strength.

Chapter Thirty-five



Deep in the offices of Stanton and Stanton, a steady staccato of metal striking paper echoed.

Everyone else had gone home for the day. Only three pool stenographers remained, two evening regulars, and Sandy, who'd volunteered to work over.

It'd been almost a month since Buddy's last letter and two weeks and thirty-eight hours since D-Day. She'd work twenty-four hours a day if it kept Buddy off her mind. Her fingers flew over the keys.

She finished the page then reached for another, but felt bare wood. "I'm all finished. What's next?" She looked over her typewriter.

The oldest of the two women shook her head. "Nothing, thank goodness. We've just been waiting for you to finish, dear. Our bus doesn't leave for twenty minutes, so we thought we could walk with you that far."

"Oh, I'm sorry you waited on me. I've got a stop to make on the way home."

Sandy hurried the two blocks out of her way and made it to the liquor store five minutes before it closed. A little voice warned about her drinking, but she ignored it. A couple of martinis to help her get to sleep couldn't be that bad.

Grand always had a nip or two at night. 'Strictly medicinal' as Harry always said.

Once home, her key found the lock, and she bumped the door with her hip. Home. But it wasn't home. Cypress Springs wasn't either. Buddy was home. She tucked the brown bag under her arm, fanned for the string, then pulled.

A bare overhead bulb glared to life and revealed a small pile of

letters on the floor. Package still snug under her elbow, she dropped her purse and grabbed the mail. There it was. Between her light bill and a letter from Emma Lee.

“Oh, thank you, God. He’s alive!” She tore open the envelope and began reading.

He loved her! Buddy said the most wonderful things. Oh how she loved him! With all her heart. She strolled to the little kitchen as she read. Oh, poor baby. War must be so awful. Everything stopped at the ‘but.’

A chill invaded the base of her neck and slid down to freeze her heart still. Surely it had stopped beating.

But I can't marry you when I come home.

The words tumbled in her mind, made her dizzy. It couldn't be happening. She held the paper out and reread the horrible words. ‘But I can't marry you.’

Oh God, why? How can it be true? We love each other. We've waited so long. Tears blurred the words, but she continued reading.

I'm already married. I'm sorry, baby. When I saw you in Dallas, I knew I had to have you no matter what, but I am married and have a little girl. I don't love Abigail like I love you, but she is my wife.

Please don't hate me. It was stupid to marry anyone but you. I'm so sorry I didn't wait. I should have never taken you to that barn, and then we would have already been married.

Please forgive me. Please understand. I can't go on with the Lord if I divorce Abigail.

I'll always love you, Sandy, but I've got to do what the Lord wants. Please find someone else and be happy. I'm so sorry.

Buddy

She crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it across the room at the framed snapshot of Buddy taken in Dallas the day before he left. It missed the picture and ricocheted off a lamp.

Her knees gave way, and she sank to the floor.

Married.

He's already married.

And he has a daughter.

Deep racking sobs gagged her.

She wanted to die.

“Oh, Buddy. Buddy.”

Pictures of him raced through her mind. The first night she saw him in the tent at Pine Bluff. Soaking wet with Emma Lee after the tornado. At the picnic. In the barn. Dallas. Oh God. He was already married when he made love to her in Dallas!

How could he be so mean?

How could she be so stupid?

She hated him. He was married. The declaration looped through her brain, tying her thoughts into knots, screaming, pounding. He's married. He's married. Papa had been right about him.

Then from the depths of her soul, a mournful wail burst loose. Tears flooded her cheeks. On the brink of insanity, Sandy sat up and straightened her back.

A tiny halting sob escaped. She bit her lip, wiped the tears away, then pried the gin from beneath her arm.

The lid twisted off. She tilted it and gulped. Sometime later—she had no idea how long—she found herself across the room still on the floor, leaning against the dresser.

The glass bottle was warm in her hand, a friend that offered numbness. She lifted it toward her lips, but only wet her tongue with a drop. Holding it at arm's length, she focused. Empty. She flung the bottle across the room.

It slammed into the far wall and shattered.

Just like her life, shattered.

All her hopes and dreams obliterated into a million pieces. Her hand found the dresser's edge. She pulled herself up and stared into the mirror.

"There you are, and aren't you a pretty sight? No wonder Buddy married someone else." She leaned forward and studied her face. "Humph. You fool. What you need is a man. Any man. Some slick ladies' man."

She picked up a comb and straightened her hair then retrieved her purse on the way out.

She'd just break his wicked heart.

Chapter Thirty-six



June 1946



he last note of the last song drifted off.

Buddy could almost see it carry the sweet incense of the saint's praises. He stared at the ceiling of the old gymnasium for a moment then faced his uniformed flock.

Most were just boys, late teens or early twenties, but they'd been bloodied, hardened beyond their years. In one sense, he hated what war did to his soldier lambs, but Bless the Lord, war also brought hard men to their knees.

The congregation held the silence and stared with eager anticipation. He let their love warm him a moment, then stiffened his neck. Bad news churned his innards. He swallowed, searching for the right way to share it.

Holy Spirit gave him nothing. But the acidic words burned his throat like bile, and he spit them out.

"I'm not preaching today."

A murmur ricocheted around the high walls then died. The two-hundred-plus men scooted to the edge of their seats, pressing in like waves on a beach. Soldiers to the end, his men. What a great bunch of guys.

"I thought about a dozen sermons for this morning's service, but none of them seemed right." He stepped from behind the wooden podium and scanned the standing-room-only crowd, stopping now and then on individual faces. Faces he loved, faces he'd die for.

"I've got to share my heart first. And then, if the Lord wants me to say anything . . ." He shrugged. "You guys know how I am."

“What’s up, Captain?” someone in the back hollered.

“Army’s shipping me out.” Buddy stepped off the platform. “Now that the war’s over, I guess I’m just too controversial.”

“You kidding us, Captain?”

“If only I were. I thought a career as a chaplain was what the Lord had for me, but it’s not going to happen. There’s no place for a Holiness preacher in this man’s army. Praising the Lord and shouting hallelujah is okay during a war, but—”

“It ain’t right, Cap. Have you talked to General Patton?”

Buddy shook his head. “God is in control. I don’t intend to fight it.” He pointed toward heaven. “Don’t believe He would approve.” A few heads nodded. He loved these guys, they were his perfect congregation.

No women.

“So what you gonna do? Go home?”

“I don’t know exactly.” The image of Sandy on the bed in the Baxter Hotel flashed across his inner eye. He shivered. “In a few days, the only boss I’ll have will be the Lord. I’ll do whatever He says.”

Home.

His angel’s image beckoned, but setting his will after the Lord, he couldn’t never go there. Sandy couldn’t be home anymore. Abigail and Amanda waited in Dalton. Oh Lord, lead me not into temptation.



Across the Atlantic, another captain’s thoughts also centered on Sandra Harris. In his Pentagon office, mere feet from the nerve center of Navy Intelligence, Harrison Prescott unconsciously stirred his coffee as he studied Pan Am’s flight schedule.

If connections went smoothly, he could be in Dallas by 0-four-hundred the next morning. Plenty of time to pack a bag, pick her up, and get to Cypress Springs by early evening the day before the funeral.

Before his London tour, wartime Washington intrigued him, but civilian life called. More specifically, Sandy had—she needed him. Flying cross country to Texas then driving five or six hours would be a treat after the mundane tasks assigned of late.

He took a sip of the sweetened brew then dialed his commander. “Captain Prescott,” he responded.

The admiral’s warrant officer put him straight through. Harry briefed Admiral Smith on his current project and answered several questions. When the old man proceeded with a few suggestions, Harry interrupted.

“Excuse me, sir. I’ll definitely pass that on, but I’m going to need a few days off. My fiancée’s grandmother died last night, and she’s pretty upset. The funeral’s day after tomorrow.” Harry hated lying, but Smith wouldn’t understand the truth.

After a brief pause, the admiral responded. “Sorry to hear that. Well, call me when you get back.”

“Yes, sir.” The phone went dead. He made a mental note to send a little gift, maybe a box of cigars. He hated the cheap stogies Smith usually burned. Kill two birds with one small bribe. Harry chuckled at himself.

Things were looking up.

Quickly, the necessary arrangements with Pan Am were confirmed then he rushed to the airport. Harry didn’t love money, only its advantages, and one of the big advantages was not having to catch military transports when you wanted to get somewhere in a hurry.

The Navy didn’t do first class, not like Pan Am anyway.

Once aboard and settled, he replayed Sandy’s tearful call. Her voice sounded terrible, but wasn’t that to be expected? She and Nana had always been so close. Besides, she didn’t think she could face her father alone.

And of course, money never lingered long in the beauty’s possession; probably not enough for the train ticket. He tried to relax, tell himself that she was only upset by her grandmother’s death.

But something else concerned him. She’d sounded half drunk—and at 0-six-hundred Dallas time. Not a good sign.

The twin props roared to life, and the huge bird lumbered down the runway. Thoughts of Sandy subsided. He tightened his grip on the armrests and pushed his head firmly into the leather seat.

He hated takeoffs, but at least no one would be shooting at them.

The plane soared west into the late morning sky then leveled off. A steward made his way up the aisle passing out the warm washcloths he loved.

“It’s afternoon somewhere, bring me a double whiskey neat.”



While her friend sped to her rescue, Sandy paced the little apartment she called home. A new song came to life on the radio. She flipped the thing off. One more love song, one more crooner, and she would throw up.

Nothing helped. She checked her watch. Harry should arrive any minute.

Why hadn’t she just met him at the airport?

The walls of her tiny apartment closed in. What she once thought

cute and cozy, now seemed dull and dirty' maybe because she hadn't cleaned in months. She hated for Harry to even see it.

What would he think? She turned her wrist again. Two minutes later than before.

The progression of men Sandy had trotted through the two-room bungalow only added insult to its shoddy interior. None of her furniture matched, not to mention there wasn't a worthwhile piece in the lot.

The curtains she'd sewn herself from cheap material—at the time she thought of it as pretty enough and inexpensive—hung thick with dust. She held one panel aside and peeked out the window.

Checking her gold timepiece again—one of the few nice things she possessed—a gift Harry insisted she take. The Rolls pulled up and stopped at the curb. She scooped up her bag and ran out to the porch.

He already hurried up the walk.

"Oh, Harry. Thank you. Thank you for coming." She flung herself into his arms and buried her face into his chest, not knowing where the sudden tears came from.

"It's okay, sweetheart. I'm here." He patted and rubbed her shoulders as he held her.

Pushing away, she wiped her cheeks then looked him square in the eyes. "Harry, I know I shouldn't. You've already done so much." His eyes were so kind. She softly cupped her palm over his strong jaw and let her fingertips slide to his chin.

My dear, faithful friend. Always there. How can I put this?"

"What?"

"I'm afraid I have another favor to ask. A big one this time."

"You know I'll do whatever I can."

The words stuck like fingers in a Chinese puzzle pulled taunt. She threw her head back and stretched her neck. They had to come out. Should she try to get in touch with Buddy one last time? See if he'd leave his wife?

No.

Many a sleepless night went into her decision, and there would be no wavering. Her mind was set. She cleared her throat did her best to swallowed the cotton ball.

"Harry?" The depth of his eyes amazed her. Oh God, is it the only way? "Will you marry me?"

"Marry you? You said, marry you?" His smile caught up to the idea. "Of course, my darling. Before or after the funeral?"

She turned and stepped away. "Never mind. Please. Forget I ever said anything. I'm so sorry. How could I ask such a thing?" A small sob escaped. "I couldn't do that, not to you."

"Whoa, Nelly. Wait a minute here. I'm not about to forget it. You

asked, I've accepted, and we're getting married, or I sue for breach of contract."

"Yeah? You'd probably win, but all you'd get would be my watch back." She twirled the golden band on her wrist and looked both ways down the street. Poor guy. How could she do this? She used him something awful.

But he always came back for more.

"Dearest Harry. Why do you put up with me?"

He leaned over, took both her hands in his own, then waited. She met his eyes. "Don't you know it's because I love you? I've loved you from the first."

He was going to do it.

Relief washed over her, even though she always knew he would. Oh, Buddy, why did you steal my heart and leave me with so little to give? Her mouth was dry. One confession remained, and she might as well get it over.

Please don't let it break his heart, God.

She squeezed his hands and looked through her tears. "Harry, I couldn't tell you over the phone. I'm sorry, I just couldn't." Her gaze fell to his spit-shined shoes.

"Why are you crying? Sandra Louise? You've made me the happiest man in the world." He laughed. "You don't have to apologize for wanting to propose in person."

She looked up. "I'm pregnant." How she hated the effect of her words on his face. For the briefest of moments, pain filled his eyes, then that sweet smile, Harry's wonderful smile, returned.

"Doesn't matter. I love you, and I'll love our baby."

The knot in her stomach loosened, but another tightened around her heart. Could she really spend the rest of her life with a man she didn't love? "You're sure?"

"Absolutely positive." He pulled her up, wrapped his arms around her again, and lifted, gently swinging her side to side. "I love you, Sandy. With all my heart."

'I know you do' almost came out her mouth, but she stifled Buddy's standard response before giving it voice. "I'll be the best wife any man ever had, I promise. You'll never be sorry."

Harry to the rescue. Such a sweet darling. She would make herself love him. She pulled away.

"Should we get going?"

"Absolutely. We've got an extra stop to make."

Not asking where, she leaned her head against his shoulder and let him lead her to the Rolls. Home. Harry was taking her to Cypress Springs. She dreaded facing Papa. Thoughts of Mama and Emma Lee vanished when the car turned into Harry's driveway.

“Why'd you come here?”

“You'll see.” He jumped out. “Be right back.”

She waited a few moments then got out and lit a cigarette. Selfishness didn't fit well, but what else could she do? At least Harry knew what he was getting going in. No matter what though, she would make him a good wife.

The door flew open, and he skipped down the steps like a kid with a new toy. He saw her and slowed to a dignified stroll.

She dropped her half-smoked Lucky. “So what's that opossum grin all about?”

Without a word, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, dropped to one knee, then held out his hand. “Will you marry me, Sandra?”

A velvet box, opened in his palm, displayed a gold wedding set with a stunning solitaire and too many smaller stones to count. She stared, mesmerized by the size and brilliance of the diamond.

Never had she ever seen one so big in person, even at the Marble Falls Jewelers. It had to be at least three carats. “Oh, Harry, they're gorgeous.”

He lifted the engagement ring and placed it on her finger. “Will you, then?”

The diamond spit fire as she shifted her hand—fingers spread—in the noontime sun. “When?” she asked, more than a little dazzled.

“As soon as possible.”

“No, when did you buy these rings?”

“They were my mother's. I inherited them, with the request to give them to the love of my life. She would have loved you, Sandy.” He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed each finger. “So they really are okay, then? You'll marry me?”

“Okay? They're unbelievably beautiful, and yes, I'll marry you. I asked in the first place. Remember?”

Chapter Thirty-seven



ust south of Dallas, Harry rehearsed.

Must have rephrased the question a hundred ways. It never sounded just right, but he had to ask. There could be no tone of accusation. Somewhere on the long stretch between Lampasas and Burnett, he decided to elicit a promise instead.

“Can you promise me something?”

“If I can, if it’s in my power.” Sandy scooted around in the seat and faced him. “What?”

He glanced over. “Promise me you’ll never see him again.”

“I promise, Harry.” She nestled into him. “Of course, I promise. You’re so good to me.” Stroking his cheek, she whispered, “I’ll never do anything to hurt you.”

The conversation needed conclusion, but Harry didn’t have the heart to put her through it. Not then. She was a frightened, wounded child. Her protection was his only desire. From that first day, he’d loved her.

Now she would soon be his. Who fathered the baby didn’t matter. Sandy was his, and he had her promise.

“I’ve got an idea.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled the diamond-studded gold band from its velvet box. “Slip this on, and we’ll tell your parents we eloped two? three?”

She nodded.

“—months ago.”

“Oh, Harry!”

“We can say we were planning to go ahead and have a big wedding after the war, but now that you’re expecting, we figure the

cat's out of the bag."

The engagement ring came off. Sandy took the gold band. "With this ring, I thee wed, Harrison Prescott." She slid it on her finger. "What about you?"

He fished in pants pocket until he found his. "It's official now." He slipped his on. A wild thought struck him. "Want to get a room? What's the next town?"

"Burnett." She laughed. "But there's no need. Since we're married, we can share my old room."

Desire stronger than he'd ever known surged through him. "Can you handle sleeping with me in your parents' home?"

"Harry, for the last year, I've. . ." She looked out the passenger window then started again. "When we first met, I was running away from my father. I started smoking, then drinking—thank you for the introduction—just to spite him.

"A year ago, I found out the man I loved . . ." Her gaze continued steady out the window. "We were engaged, well, I thought we were. Anyway, I found out he was already married, had been the whole time.

"Oh, darling."

"He only used me." She lit a cigarette. "I couldn't come up with a way to hurt him back, so I looked for smooth-talking ladies' men and broke every heart I could."

"Sandy."

Her hand moved to rest on her tummy bulge beneath her cotton dress. "So, you see, I'm not even sure who . . ."

Strangely relieved by her confession, he grabbed one of her cigarettes and lit up. Something he rarely did. A prolonged silence hung in the air.

"I'd only sleep with them after I was certain they'd fallen hard, then—" She tossed her smoke out. "Needless to say, I wasn't very nice. So . . . to reassure you, Harry, yes. I can promise. And I won't have any trouble keeping it, either."

He drove left-handed and wrapped his right arm over her shoulders. "We can't change the past, only learn from our mistakes."

"You're so right. I should have married you years ago, Mister Prescott. Now, about that getting a room business. Mama would have a conniption fit if we even mentioned staying anywhere else. Besides . . ."

"Yes?"

"Do you really think we'll do much sleeping?" She kissed his ear. His desire increased. Wasn't sure he could stand it much longer. "How are you doing with your grandmother's passing?"

"Fine, I guess. I loved Nana, but it was her time." Sandy shrugged.

“Since my grandfather went to be with Jesus, she's missed him so. I know she's happy now. There's no pain or tears there, you know. I'll miss her, but somewhere inside, I guess I'm glad for Nana's sake.”

The sun set before they reached the gravel road to Cypress Springs. It duly impressed him that she could find her way in the dark. Everything looked the same to him.

After the fourth or fifth turn, he figured they were lost for sure, but two lefts and a sharp right later, they arrived. Before Harry could jump out and open Sandy's door, the porch overflowed with folks hollering hellos.

Children ran, jumped, and played everywhere. He'd always wanted a large family. Hopefully, hers wouldn't see through his and his almost-wife's deception.

His love ran to embrace one of the younger women. Must be Emma Lee. Though she never came out and said anything, he sensed Sandy harbored a little jealousy over her sister's happy marriage.

A large man filled the open door. The infamous Mister John. Several more women joined in the sisters' hugs. Sandy finally broke away.

“Look. Look.” She held her ring finger under the porch light. Oohs and aahs followed.

The big man stepped around the ladies and extended his hand. “I'm John Harris, young man. Sandy's father. Did I hear right? You two married?”

“Yes, sir. It's great to meet you.” Harry shook the man's hand with a firm grip and stared straight into his eyes. “Captain Harrison Prescott, sir, and I've loved your daughter with all my heart since the first time I saw her seven years ago.”

“I see.”

“We were going to have a big wedding after the war, but decided to elope instead. I intended to ask you for her hand, but—”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways, Harrison. That your car, young man?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

Sandy broke free from the circle of admirers and grabbed Harry's arm. “Come on, sweetheart. There's so many people I want you to meet.”

While she pulled him up the steps toward the gaggle of women, he flashed his biggest smile at Mister Harris.

“Mama, this is Harry.”

It went pretty well, even though Sandy never really acknowledged her father. Mama Harris, beautiful and gracious, made Harry feel right at home.

Once inside, Sandy introduced him to more aunts, uncles, and

cousins than he could shake a stick at. By the time she got around to the friends and neighbors, he gave up on trying to remember names, but loved it all.

Never had he experienced such a family gathering.

The tables and sideboards overflowed with all kinds of food. They ate and talked then ate some more. Harry listened mostly, drinking in the myriad of personalities and family stories.

His mind kept wandering to Sandy's upstairs bedroom and what they were going to do there.

"Harry works at the Pentagon." Sandy's mention of his name pulled his thoughts back downstairs.

"That right, Captain?" An uncle, he was pretty sure, but couldn't recall which.

"Yes, sir. Admiral Smith's Chief of Staff."

"You pulling my leg, son?"

"No, sir." Harry started to elaborate, but held his tongue. Long-winded war stories must not be the way the evening progressed. Definitely time to wind down not catch a second wind.

"So then your boss coordinated all the Allied ships used in the D-Day invasion. Didn't he? Ain't that right?" That guy may have been a cousin or a neighbor, Harry had no idea.

"That's correct." Here it came. The question everyone asked when they found out he worked for Smith.

Another man scooted to the edge of his chair. "Were you there? When we stormed the beaches at Normandy?"

"Yes, sir." He wished he could plead classified, but it had been in all the papers. The room fell silent waiting for his recount of the great day. Might as well give them what they wanted.

Harry proceeded with a blow by blow of the Allied invasion, and in spite of wanting to get Sandy upstairs more than anything he could remember, he enjoyed the telling.

"Then General Marshal recalled us to Washington in August," he added in conclusion.

No one spoke for a long minute, but before you knew it, several couples stood and excused themselves with showers of kisses and hugs. During the good byes, Sandy squeezed his hand. "You ready for bed, sweetheart?"

His heart jumped into his throat. "Sure. Whenever. I mean, if you are." His face burned.

She stretched. "I'm worn out." She pulled him to his feet. "I know you must be tired, Captain."

The Turtle Creek mansion had closets bigger than her childhood bedroom, but he didn't care. His hands trembled as he fumbled with his buttons. Sandy slipped out of her dress, then stood there grinning.

“Troubles?”

“Not really.” He finished with his shirt.

“Hand me your pants.” She stuck out her hand. “And I’ll hang them up.”

“Spoiling me already, huh?”

She hung the trousers on the back of the bedroom door, stepped out of her slip, then faced him. “Want to help with the rest?”

Mesmerized by her beauty, he didn’t even notice the slight pooch of her belly. Her eyes twinkled as she floated toward him.

“Something wrong?” She stood only tantalizing inches away.

“Nothing.” He reached around and unhooked her bra. “Actually, everything is so very right. I love you so much it hurts, Sandra.”

She kissed him gently on the lips. “You’ll have to get used to loving me, I guess. I’m sorry it hurts now, my wonderful Prince Charming, but I’ll never hurt you again.”



The declaration dredged up an eight-by-ten glossy of Buddy up on that platform leading the singing.

Oh, how she loved to watch him sing. Like she’d been taken to another place.

Could she make herself forget him?

Yes.

She could and she would—for Harry’s sake.

Dear Harry. She hoped she told the truth.

“You have my promise.”

Chapter Thirty-eight



minutes passed after the fourth cock's crow.

The bedroom's door opened.

Harry feigned sleep.

"Sandy, you awake?" a female voice whispered.

Harry peeked. Emma Lee grinned, her head poked just inside the door. Sandy, still snuggled on his chest remained motionless.

"Good morning, Sis."

"Sorry to wake the lovebirds, but Mama's got breakfast on the table." She stepped into the room.

Sandy raised up. "Mornin', Lee Lee. Come on, Harry. Better get dressed. Papa'll get ugly if we're too late."

Emma Lee grinned. "He's poured water on more than one sleepyhead."

"Tell your mama we'll be down in a minute." Harry motioned for his new sister-in-law to leave.

She backed toward the door. "You two carry on like that every night?"

Before either could reply, the intruder disappeared. Sandy elbowed Harry in the ribs, grinning. "Sure hope so." She giggled then slid out. "We really do need to hurry, honey. He won't let them start until we get down there."

His mind was not on food. Until the unbelievable night he'd just spent, he only thought he'd made love. After Sandy had drifted off, he didn't even try to sleep. Dreams don't come true very often.

He intended to savor every minute of his wedding night.

"Come on, slowpoke." She tugged on an exposed toe.

He caught her hand and pulled her to the bed. "Who could blame me? I may never leave this bed."

"You're being silly." She kissed him. "Papa will—"

"You don't have to be afraid of him or care about what he'll do again, my love."

A puzzled expression distorted her face. Like she wanted to believe him, but . . .

"You just don't understand. Can we go on down, now?"

"No, sweetheart, I do understand. But I'll hurry anyway. For your sake. We don't want to be impolite."

Biscuits, ham, fried potatoes, gravy, and a steaming plate of scrambled eggs covered the small kitchen table with a dozen different jars of homemade jellies and jams filling every niche.

Sandy took her corner next to her mother, nodding a quick greeting to her and her sister. She ignored her father. Harry sat beside her at the opposite end from a scowling Mister John.

He watched the others while the old man blessed the food, and pondered growing up in that family. In spite of her father's gruff exterior, he was probably a good man.

One day Harry intended to get the whole story of exactly what he had done to warrant his daughter's hatred.

"Have a good night?" Emma's question came with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"Best in years." He pressed his knee against his pretend wife's, who glanced her sister's way, but didn't respond. "Mama Harris, if this meal tastes as good as it smells, I hope it won't offend you that I make a pig of myself."

"You go right ahead and fill up, Harry. I'd be pleased to have you at my table any time."

Breakfast passed in a strained silence. Mister John finished first, leaned back, and fished out his fixings. While he worked the rice paper around the tobacco, he stared at Harry, who intentionally averted his gaze.

His immature attempt at intimidation was almost comical.

If Sandy hadn't been his little girl, Harry would— He put that thought out of his mind. The man only wanted to protect his daughter. A desire he knew well enough. Harris would find out soon enough, he needn't worry.

A cloud of blue smoke circled over the table. "You a God-fearing man, Harrison?"

"Well, sir," Harry drew a deep breath. "I don't fear God, only what people do in His name. Seems to me the Bible says God is love. What's to fear from a loving God? And please, call me Harry."

Miranda gave Sandy a concerned glance. Mister John drew on his

cigarette. "Good Book also says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

"If memory serves, that's in the Old Testament, written before Jesus, who said He came to fulfill the law. I believe the death of Jesus appeased that aspect of God, where men had to fear Jehovah's wrath."

"You some kind of holy roller?"

A chuckle escaped. "No, sir. I haven't settled on what denomination I favor. I've met a lot of good men from all faiths."

Her father turned his attention to his prodigal daughter. "What about you, young lady? Have you forsaken the church?"

"Let's not talk about religion, Papa. I came back for Nana's funeral, not a lecture."

Harry scooted his chair over and wrapped his arm around Sandy's shoulder. "Soon as the war's over, we'll find a church, especially now that the baby's on the way."

Miranda jumped out of her chair and hugged her daughter. "Oh, my! A grandbaby? Are you sure, Sandra Louise?"

"Yes, Mama. I'm due in January."

"What wonderful and exciting news." She looked at her husband. "Isn't that wonderful news, John?"

He didn't answer.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Papa." Emma stood. "You're going to be a granddaddy. Can't you at least congratulate these two?"

While the women jabbered and squealed together, Mister John left the room. Harry believed the confrontation and announcement went well enough. His new father-in-law-to-be reminded him somewhat of his own dad.

A strong, intelligent man who spoke his mind. The major difference, of course, boiled down to money.

At the church, Sandy whimpered on Harry's shoulder as the preacher extolled Nana's servant's heart. A warmth spread inside, made him feel good, like they were an old married couple, except her surface grieving concerned him.

Convinced that she buried the bulk of her sorrow, he believed she should just let go, cry it all out. From the way everyone else carried on, Nana must have been one fine lady. He wished he'd had the opportunity to know her.

Made him sad for his own mother's scantily attended funeral though.

The graveside service touched his heart. Huge oaks and trimmed cedars guarded the wrought-iron fence that surrounded better than an acre of carved stone markers. On the crest of a rolling hill, it seemed a fine final resting place.

After the pallbearers lowered the coffin, the mourners drifted

about, congregating in small groups. Harry left Sandy to her people and wandered among the graves. An old headstone caught his eye, the date read 1838. Sandy slipped her arm through his.

"You ready? Everyone's going back now."

"Sure, but I'd enjoy visiting the family cemetery again. There's so much history here."

Following more food and tearful goodbyes, he left Cypress Springs behind in the rear view mirror. He'd never forget his first night there and hoped the deception would never be discovered, especially by John Harris.

Resolved to mend the rift between father and daughter, he figured if Mister John knew the truth, he'd hold it against her and him forever. The man didn't impress Harry as the forgive-and-forget type.

Following Sandy's directions until the gravel road ended, he turned east.

"No, no. It's a lot quicker to go back the way we came."

He winked. "We have no big reason to go back to Dallas. I figured we could fly straight to DC from Austin."

"But I told my boss I'd be back as quick as I could. He wasn't all that happy about me taking off when they're so busy."

"Don't worry about it. I'll fix things with him."

"What about my apartment? And your car?" A hint of panic edged her voice.

"We'll have someone move your things, and getting this car back is no hill for a stepper. Don't worry." He reached over and patted her thigh gently. "I'll handle it."

She squeezed his arm. "Oh, please, I can't. Please don't make me."

"Sandy." Jealous pain stabbed his gut. "Why not? If I may ask?"

"Of course, you may, but I just can't. Please turn the car around."

"Okay, Sandy." He eased the car to the shoulder and put it in park. "What's his name? Who's waiting back in Dallas?"

"No one! I swear. You don't understand. It's just that . . . that—" She broke into the unleashed sobs she'd held inside at the funeral. "Well, I can't stand the thought of getting on an airplane."

"You've never flown?"

"No, and I never want to. I know it's silly, but the contraption would crash for sure with me on board. Please don't make me." Her words came out in blurts between sobs. "I'm sorry. I just can't."

Relief filled his heart. "Sandy, don't apologize. It's okay. We'll drive." He pushed the hair out of her eyes and wiped her cheeks. "And by the way, I do understand. I hate the things myself."

Chapter Thirty-nine



andy supported her belly.

She carefully lowered herself into the rocker, a surprise gift from Harry. Dinner awaited his arrival. The apartment he leased, only three blocks from the Pentagon, made hers in Dallas seem more like a pantry.

Though at least three times bigger than her Texas cracker box, Harry called it modest.

The physical aspect of their relationship cooled almost proportionally to her expanding waistline in the five months since he married her.

Unsure whether sweet Harry acted out of consideration or if her misshapen profile turned him off, she swore to herself again and again that she would make it up to him after the baby's birth.

Hefting her whale-self out of her favorite chair, she waddled on swollen ankles to the stoop and lit a cigarette. Thanks to a high pressure dome hovering over the Eastern seaboard, the November afternoon was warmer than usual.

A sweater sufficed. Before she finished her smoke, Harry trotted into view with an unusually big smile plastered across his face.

"Hello, my little mother-to-be. How are you feeling?" Hardly slowing, he pecked her cheek. "I've got to hurry. Dinner ready?"

"Fine and yes." She followed hot on his heels as he darted inside and headed straight for their bedroom. "What's all the big rush about?"

"You're never going to believe who called me today."

"Well, whoever it was sure got you going."

“Go ahead, guess.” He hurriedly undressed.

With a sigh, she sat down on the bed, rubbing her lower back. “Let’s see now.” She closed her eyes in deep concentration then opened them. “I’ll say the President of the United States.”

His lips straightened and disappointment fell on his face. “How’d you know?” He pulled his tee-shirt off then flung his shorts into the air with his toes. Catching the underwear, he tossed both into the laundry hamper.

“Just a wild guess, you teaser.” She laughed. “Now tell me who called before I inflict bodily pain upon your naked self.”

“But it was the president. I thought you found out somehow.”

Now she rolled on the bed in laughter. “Good grief, Prescott. Tell me who called.”

“Really. I promise. It was the president. Harry Truman has invited me to the White House.” Adjusting the water, he stepped into the shower.

“You’re joking!”

“No. Actually, Truman said he wanted to see if I’m as good a poker player as Admiral Smith claims.”

She pulled back the shower curtain and steam billowed out into the cooler air. “Really, Harry? You’re serious?” Infected by her husband’s excitement, she paid no attention to the droplets escaping the tub.

“Serious as soap suds. I’m going to the White House tonight for a game.” He grinned as he lathered his hair then flung suds at her. “Go ahead and get dinner on the table. I’ll be there in six minutes.”

As best as her condition allowed, she hurried to the kitchen. Harry had an invitation to the home of the president. Imagine, the White House.

Just as she placed the chicken casserole on the table, a pain rippled across her abdomen. Flinching, she grabbed her belly, managing not to cry out, but he came in and saw her doubled over.

“You okay, sweetheart?”

The pain eased, and she straightened, arching her back. “Oh, sure. The baby just kicked me pretty hard. That’s all.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.” She passed the green beans. “Of course. I’m fine. Now eat, and tell me how you got to be such a good poker player. I didn’t even know you played cards.”

Though normally a meticulous and methodical eater, her husband attacked his dinner. She only picked at hers, amused by his boyish excitement. Fun that she’d never witnessed that aspect of his personality.

He swallowed. “There’s a lot you still have to learn about me.” He

gulped half of his iced tea down and cleared his throat. "Started playing as a kid. Father gave me a dollar a week allowance, then he'd win it back playing five-card stud. By the time I turned twenty, I played in his regular Friday night game."

"So did you win?"

His crooked smile flashed. "More than I lost, but sometimes it cost me." He speared the last bite of dinner.

"How so?"

Finishing his tea, he started toward the pitcher with his glass. "One night, I was in a high stakes game." His eyes went to the ceiling as though searching his memory. "I was twenty-two or twenty-three. Thought I was the cat's meow when it came to poker.

"Anyway, I'm holding a pat hand and one of Dad's cronies doesn't have the cash to call, so he puts title to this downtown property in the pot." Harry laughed.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I didn't realize what the guy was doing or think it strange he just happened to have the deed on him. All I could see was I had him beat, so I agreed." He paused and shook his head.

"So did you win it?"

"Oh, yeah, I won the pot, but it turned out the property had seven years back taxes owed. Cost me a bundle. Then I found out my father had put his buddy up to it to teach me a lesson."

Sandy slid his empty plate under hers. "That was mean. Sounds like your father and mine have a lot in common."

"Thought so myself." He patted her tummy. "You going to be okay, here by yourself? I may not be home till morning."

"Of course. Go ahead and take some of Mister Truman's money, then tomorrow, we'll celebrate."

He kissed her cheek then hurried back to the bedroom. She couldn't decide whether he acted more like a kid on Christmas morning or a blue tick pup getting to hunt for the first time, but the thrill of going to the White House sure had him in its grip.

Gathering the dishes, she carried them to the sink. Just as she lowered them into the sudsy water, another pain contracted her abdomen. She bit back the urge to holler. It passed.

The clock read five forty-five. While she finished cleaning the kitchen, she kept an eye on it, just in case.

Ten minutes passed. She relaxed. No need to worry Harry. Let him have his fun. Playing poker at the White House would make a great story to tell their kids.

He strolled down the hall, decked out in a navy blue jacket and gray slacks. "This look all right?"

"Like a million bucks."

“You sure you're going to be okay?” He kissed her.
“You go ahead and have a good time. I'll be fine.”



Harry's insides churned, waiting outside his apartment building. Smith had said eighteen-thirty sharp. Two minutes till. Intuition told him more was at stake in the card game than money.

In the weeks following Roosevelt's death, things had changed drastically at the Pentagon. Smith found himself suddenly in the loop, and things got interesting. Harry hadn't finalized any plans for after the war.

The Japs were already beat, they just didn't know it.

The admiral's car pulled up. Reflex checked his wrist watch. Eighteen-thirty sharp. Harry jumped in. “Evening, sir.”

Smith grinned. “Where's your sack?”

“Don't need one.” Harry shrugged. “I'll take Mister Truman's marker if I can't carry my winnings.”

“That's the spirit.” The admiral swatted his knee. “This is going to be a game to remember.”

For the first couple of hours, Harry played extremely conservatively, letting his nerves settle and getting a feel for the other players, especially the president. Halfway into the third hour, he bluffed, and nobody called.

Several hands later, he tried again. Everyone around to the president folded.

“I call,” Truman put his chips in the pot and turned over two pair, kings and tens.

Harry tossed his cards over in the center of the table for all to see. “You caught me, sir. I was trying to buy one.”

“That's what I thought, Captain.” The president raked in the chips.

The agreed deadline—0-two-hundred—came too soon. The other players cashed in and left. Smith hung back. Unsure of what to do, Harry busied himself straightening the room. Truman closed the rec room door.

“Well, Captain, not many men your age and rank have the guts to bluff their Commander-in-Chief.”

He looked the president square in the eyes. “It's only a bluff if you get caught.”

“True enough.” Truman's mid-western twang edged with mirth. A steward entered and whispered something into the president's ear. The president's smile faded, replaced by concern.

“Admiral, looks like our business with Captain Prescott will have

to wait. They've taken his wife to the hospital. Seems he's going to be a daddy before the day's over."

His heart leapt into his throat. "Where is she?"

Truman held the door. "Car's waiting. Congratulations, Captain. I pray all goes well."

All the way to the hospital, Harry chastised himself for leaving her alone. But it was her time, no reason for alarm or to think anything had gone wrong. Women had babies every day.

What effect would holding another man's baby have on him? He'd asked himself the question many times. He'd soon know its answer.

"Where's my wife? She's having a baby." It infuriated him that the nurse continued chatting on the phone at least a whole minute after he arrived.

She calmly stood behind the desk of the Emergency Room and covered the receiver with her fingers. "What's her name, sir?"

"Prescott. Sandra Prescott."

"Oh, Captain Prescott. Sorry for the delay. They've taken her on up to delivery. Down the hall there and to your right."

He burst through the double swinging doors marked Labor and Delivery. Someone yelled at him as he went room to room.

A white-coated man grabbed his arm. "Hold on here. Where do you think you're going?"

"To find my wife. Sandra Prescott. She's having a baby."

The man nodded. "Come with me." He led him through another set of doors. "We're sorry it took so long to reach you. No one believed your wife at first."

"What?"

"We thought she was talking out of her head, delirious, wanting us to call you at the White House."

Everything in Harry wanted to slug the guy, but he didn't. He blamed himself. Never should have left her, but her due date was still two months away. "Where is she?"

"Wait here. I'll tell the doctor you've arrived, and he'll be out as soon as possible." The man slipped through a door marked NO ADMITTANCE.

The thought to follow urged Harry after him, but he refrained and paced the small waiting area instead. Before he made two complete circles, another man in green scrubs emerged.

"Captain Prescott?"

"Yes. How's my wife?"

"I'm Doctor Williamson. I'm afraid she's not doing well. We've had some complications. Your wife has lost a substantial amount of blood. Her condition is critical. I'm sorry, but there's a chance she won't make it."

Harry grabbed the man by his tunic. "What? What do you mean, she may not make it? What complications? What kind of doctor are you? Can't you handle a routine delivery?" He released the doctor and stormed toward the delivery door.

"It's the baby."

Harry stopped and turned. "What do you mean, it's the baby?"

"It's lodged in the birth canal. There's a slim chance we can still save your wife, but we'd lose the baby."

"How? What?"

"Well, if we crush the baby's skull, your wife may be able to deliver. We might save her."

"Do it. I don't care about the baby. Get in there and do whatever it takes to save Sandra."

The doctor shook his head. "You're certain, Captain Prescott? An emergency Cesarean might save the baby, but put your wife at more risk. You need to know, either way, we may lose them both."

Rage boiled in Harry and clinched his teeth repeatedly. "Doctor, get back in there and save my wife, or I'll see you never practice medicine again."

"If you're sure. There are some forms required."

"Fine, but quit wasting time. I'll sign anything you want, just save her."

Harry continued pacing. Within minutes, a nurse came with a consent form. "Were you really playing poker with President Truman?"

Glaring, Harry scribbled his signature on the appropriate line and handed her the paper. Without another word, she retreated, and he resumed his pacing.

As he walked, remorse ate away his rage. Sandy would hate him for having the baby killed to save her, but how could he live without her?

The minutes crawled by.

With each tick of the large black and white hall clock, he became more certain the love of his life had died. Remorse deepened to profound depression. He couldn't live without her, not after having the last wonderful months.

The doctor walked out. Grim-faced, Harry braced himself for bad news.

"She's not out of the woods, but I think she'll pull through. The baby was a little girl. We've sent her corpse to the morgue."

He stared in disbelief, not trusting his ears. "But Sandy . . . will be okay?"

"I can't promise. The next few hours will be critical, but I'd say her chances look pretty good."

"When can I see her?"

"They're moving her to recovery now. You can see her there."

"Thanks, Doctor." She'd be okay. That's all that mattered. He could live with his decision as long as he had Sandy.

He stared out the window, unseeing, while she slept. His lack of remorse vanished when he learned the baby was a girl. All night he sought absolution, but only found paradox.

Even considered praying once, but he'd make the same choice again, regardless of the pain.

Sandy stirred, bringing Harry to his feet. Hardly any blood remained in the glass bottle hanging upside down by her bed. Her breath sounded shallow and a little raspy, but easy enough.

The night wore into day before her eyelids fluttered. Harry steeled himself, forcing regret from his face. He had bluffed the president, surely his wife would believe anything.

She smiled a weak little grin. "Did we have a boy or a girl?"

Tears welled as he squeezed her hand. "A little girl, sweetheart." They ran down his cheeks.

"What? What's wrong, Harry?"

"She was stillborn, Sandy." He lied. "I'm so sorry, honey. The baby didn't make it."

"No. Dear Lord, no." She screamed and cried until her voice almost left completely. He stood by, holding her when she wanted, staying back when she said. "Honey?" She reached out her hand. "Where's the baby? I want to hold her."

He slipped his hand over hers, interlacing fingers. "They've taken her on to the funeral home. I wired your folks."

"But I want to hold her." Sandy's lip quivered. "I need to see her."

"No, sweetheart, you really don't. The baby had some deformities. You don't want to . . ."

"Oh, Harry." Tears filled her red, swollen eyes again. "It's God's punishment!"

The truth sprang to his mouth, but he refused it voice. "God isn't like that, Sandy. Things like this just happen. It's no one's fault."

"Yes, He does. He knows your sins and He punishes you. He took my baby. My baby! Oh God! God hates me! I want my baby." Sobs racked her thin frame.

Hugging her, his heart ached. If only he could take away her pain. "Don't say that. God loves you."

Her nurse came in and gave her an injection. Harry held her until she drifted off again, whimpering softly. He hated lying, but couldn't bear to tell her the truth. Not just yet.

Not while she was still so weak. She'd be okay. That's all that mattered.

Time heals, the poets say. At least he wouldn't have to raise another man's child, though that thought offered little comfort. Guilt persisted without a known balm. His lie only worsened the paradox, but she could never know the truth.

Chapter Forty



April 1949

eventeen-year-old Jac Carpenter marched down the drab hallway toward his father's office.

He'd been summoned. Not by the pet name his grandmother dubbed him with the day he came home from the hospital, but by his Christian name, John Austin. He rapped his knuckles quietly against the closed door.

Day or night, it didn't matter. The door was always closed.

No response.

He raised his fist to knock again, but midair, froze. His shoulders lifted, and his chest expanded. He stood, motionless as a hunter with a buck in his scope, then exhaled, careful not to make noise. His neck muscles knotted.

Hatred and self-loathing churned his gut, straining to make their way through his apprehension, but he shoved everything deep, to that place where he kept his mother's picture. His jaw muscles flexed twice. He gritted his teeth and knocked again.

"Come."

He hustled in, stopping exactly one and one-half feet from the colonel's desk. The almost bare room, darkened by hickory paneling and heavily draped windows, reeked of his father.

Jac stood at attention and avoided the stench best he could by breathing through his mouth. The air tasted almost as bad. His eyes fixed on a blank spot just over his father's broad right shoulder. He knew it well.

"Boy," the elder whispered in a raspy voice, "you got to learn."

“Yes, sir.”

Jac's father rose slowly then strode around the desk, pulling out his belt as he walked. “Assume the position.”

Bending at the waist, he grabbed his knees and closed his eyes. He thought of his mother. Actually, he remembered her image from the picture his grandmother had shown him.

His father allowed neither photographs nor any mention of his mother's name.

Whop.

In spite of his denims, the blow stung. Jac clenched everything in him. Crying out would only extend the punishment.

Whop.

A tear fell to the hardwood floor. He bit the inside of his cheek as he studied the round droplet seeping into the dry wood. He hoped his father hadn't seen it.

Whop.

The pain intensified, so much that he almost said enough, but he'd never begged before. He debated taking the belt, but rejected the notion. He was duty bound, and he maintained the position.

Whop.

His rear numbed, and a burning sensation streaked into his thighs. Was he ever going to stop? The fight wasn't that bad.

Whop.

Involuntarily, he sucked a breath, and the mere act of breathing increased the searing, like someone had thrown gasoline on his backside and lit a match.

The taste of blood reminded him of his cheek. He released the soft flesh and plugged the hole with his tongue. The belt struck again and again until he lost count. Each blow seemed worse than the last.

After two more swats, the belt tip tapped the floor. He peeked under his arm. The Colonel's chest heaved. His breathing slowed then returned to normal. Jac braced himself for round two.

“Stand up, boy.”

It hadn't come. He straightened. His starched denim scraped the welts, shooting new streaks of fire burning across his flesh. He gritted his teeth. His father stepped around and leaned in, fouling the air with his whiskey breath.

Jac stared at his spot.

“Fighting for what you believe is one thing, boy, but beating a fellow student senseless . . .” The old man scowled then shook his head and lumbered to his chair.

“Sir?” He managed a calm and respectful voice learned from years of practice.

“What?”

“If I may explain, sir.”

“No. I do not want explanations, excuses. I want it to stop.” The old man fell into the well-worn chair and casually flipped his hand in the air. “Get out of my sight.” He looked at the papers on his desk and began reading.

He blinked back tears. The old man’s stubbornness hurt worse than the beating. Hurt so bad he could scream, but as always, he buried it deep in the dwelling place of his memories. Automatically, he saluted, spun, and marched out.

His father coughed. The large desk drawer rolled out as Jac exited the chamber. Without looking, he knew the colonel was already sucking on Ol’ Rose.

Outside the door, he paused. Enough was enough. That day, he’d gone too far. Jac barely touched his backside and headed toward his room. He would wait a week though. The welts would be gone by then.

Lying in bed, he formulated his preliminary plan. The week would give him an opportunity to reassess any faulty reasoning.

Seven days passed. He decided to wait a few more until the discoloration completely disappeared. That night at supper, he changed his mind. The old man pushed back his half-eaten chow, rose, and wobbled toward him.

“Fitness reports,” he muttered, grabbing Jac’s shoulder with his thumb and forefinger and squeezing. His eyes locked with the old man’s. Even after eating, the whiskey stench lingered heavy on his father’s breath.

The old man squeezed harder. Jac flinched then jerked his shoulder away. “Do your duty, Son. Always do your duty.”

He stared at his father’s back as the old sot navigated the narrow hall. Could his father really read his mind? He always claimed he could.

Pity seeped into Jac’s soul, but the decision had been made, and tonight would be perfect. In a few hours, Lieutenant Colonel Bernard M. Carpenter, US Army Retired, would be dead drunk.

Though his appetite left, Jac swung back to his plate and attacked his food anyway; wouldn’t do for the old man to find any waste. Another beating that night would only delay the inevitable.

After drying the dinner dishes and putting the kitchen in order, he finished his lessons. Routine couldn’t be broken. He prepared for lights out, but knew there’d be no bed check.

His mind wandered to happier times, before the colonel had been forced to retire. He’d loved his father, looked up to him, but then that man was gone. The drunk . . .

Jac’s shoulders shivered. No place for emotions during a mission.

He got into bed, tossed around a couple of times, then slipped out. Barefooted and in his skivvies, he tiptoed through the dark house. A floorboard groaned just outside the old man's office. He paused.

Nothing.

He pressed his ear against the door. His heart pounded, but he could hear his father's raspy snore over the throbbing in his chest. Jac stretched himself to his full six feet two inches. No time for childish sentiments.

He twisted the doorknob and stepped in.

Everything was exactly as he knew it would be.

The colonel slumped over his desk, the empty whiskey bottle in his hand. Jac eased to the left side of the desk and pulled out the bottom drawer. The Colt rested in its place.

Lifting his father to a sitting position, he held him with one hand while retrieving the service revolver with the other. He moved behind the old man's high-backed chair, making sure to keep his father upright.

Switching the gun to his right hand, he released the colonel, who fell back in his chair. Jac cocked the hammer. Colonel Carpenter opened one bloodshot eye. He pressed the barrel against his father's temple.

"Don't," the old man whispered.

"Duty, Dad." Jac squeezed the trigger. His father's head jerked violently away from the blast. The left side of his skull exploded across the room, smattering the dingy walls.

Jac gasped for air, tasting his father. His stomach soured. He swallowed, forcing down bile. He wanted to run, get a breath of fresh air, but he wasn't finished yet.

His hand shook as he placed the revolver in the colonel's lifeless palm and wrapped his limp fingers around the grip.

He backed toward the door, inhaling deeply as he went. He surveyed the bloody mess. Jac pried open the door to his hidden storeroom of emotions, letting all the lost love he'd ever had for his father spring forth.

He retched then vomited repeatedly until his stomach was empty. He stepped into his regurgitated dinner, retreated, and closed the door. He strolled to the kitchen and dialed the number for the police.

Mission complete.

Duty done.

Chapter Forty-one



heriff Daniel Burnley hurried down the hall.

Why had they built the courthouse hallway so narrow? He arrived at his private door, avoiding the minor aggravations and deluge of hellos. In twenty years of law enforcement, he'd seen more than his share of suicides.

But the Carpenter case was different. He knew the man.

Gruesome pictures from his inside coat pocket were quickly spread over his desk. The retired colonel just didn't fit the profile; not the type at all. No, it was murder, and Burnley was as sure as he'd ever been.

Neither did he himself fit the typical, potbelly, good-ol'-boy sheriff's image. Tall and lean, and just as mean, most of his men called him Switch, but only a few to his face.

What set Burnley apart and kept him in office was his keen insight, especially involving homicides. His instincts had put more killers behind bars than he cared to remember.

He rearranged the morbid black and whites. Raw gore stopped bothering him years ago, but his stomach rumbled. What gnawed his gut was that the kid had killed his father in cold blood.

Walking around the desk, he got a different perspective, looking at them upside down, might reveal a hidden clue. It'd happened only once, but he always tried it, just in case.

His Chief Deputy, Roscoe Tully, opened the door and flopped on the desk's corner, ignoring the files there. He fingered the pictures. Burnley gave up trying to get the man to knock or sit in one of the

office chairs.

The ill-mannered brute was too valuable to fire and too good natured to stay mad at, so he put up with the lack of social graces.

"Hey, Switch. We all heard you sneaking in through your private entrance. Get up on the wrong side of the bed or something?"

"Morning, Roscoe."

"Bea's got a stack of messages waiting for you. Want me to fetch 'em?"

"Not now."

"Doc Ramsey called. Wants us to release the stiff. He's calling it a suicide, says it's an open and shut case. Everyone pretty much agrees."

Burnley looked at the deputy. "What do you think?"

"Well, now I've heard stories about Colonel Carpenter all my life. My daddy thinks the guy won both wars all by himself. But, since they forced him to retire, he's been drunk more than sober. Man like that probably just couldn't live with himself no more. I figure he just ended it."

"That what you want to believe, or what you really think?"

"Well, Dan, since you asked . . . twice. What I really think is that the Carpenter boy had one too many beatings." He pointed his barrel finger at Burnley and pulled his thumb trigger. "Pow."

"Interesting. They said anything about a funeral?"

"If we release the body, tomorrow noon. Some preacher from Pine Bluff already called twice trying to confirm."

"What's the deal? I thought the Carpenters were members over at Second Street Methodist. Reverend Hunter out of town?"

Roscoe scooted over, rearranging his walrus rear-end and permanently creased a folder.

"Tully . . ." Burnley sighed and pulled on the file.

The chief deputy stood and glanced contemptuously at the sheriff's messy desk. "Seems the old man had his funeral all planned out. Insisted on this guy Nightingale officiating. Old war buddies or something. Carpenter even picked what songs was supposed to be sung. Efficient to the end."

"Nightingale, huh? That wouldn't be Nathaniel Nightingale?"

"Yeah," Roscoe scratched his chin. "I think that's what they said. You know him?"

"Don't you remember? He and his boy came through here in the late thirties or early forties. Pitched a big tent down by the river and held church every night. You'd have thought Jesus himself had come to town the way everyone got so excited.

"Lots of folks claimed they were healed. Don't you remember the ruckus?"

Roscoe slapped his holster, another habit that annoyed Burnley.

“Yeah, sure, I remember. After it died down, seems like they went south from here; Marble Falls I think.” He paused, obviously searching his vast storehouse of information.

The deputy pulled a dingy handkerchief from his back pocket and blew his nose. “Yeah, summer of ’39.” He stuffed the rag back in his pocket. “Remember that bad twister? If I recall, same storm got their tent.”

“And Nightingale ended up staying in . . . in—”

“Pine Bluff?” He slapped his holster again. “How about that?”

Burnley walked around to his chair and sank down. “You sure about Nightingale being requested?”

“Yes, sir. Got a copy of the will from Carpenter’s sister.”

“What’s the date on it?”

“Well, the part about his funeral was added in May of ’47. He drafted the original right after his wife died in ’35. The boy was only what? Three or four?”

Burnley leaned back, studied the ceiling for a minute, then stacked the photos and handed them to the deputy. “File these, and call the doctor. They can have him.”

“Yes, sir. Doc Ramsey’ll be glad to hear it. You know how he hates stiffs in his back room. Says it’s bad for business.”

“Wouldn’t want to hinder the good doctor’s saw-bone trade.”

Roscoe smiled as he closed the door, but Burnley couldn’t decide if it was at his little joke or because he’d decided not to bring murder charges against young John Austin Carpenter.

The next day, everyone in town turned out for the funeral; not often was a home town war hero buried. Burnley watched the pallbearers unload the casket. Shame he ended so badly.

The Reverend Nightingale looked just as he remembered, except a little rounder and maybe a little less flashy. Unlike his fiery sermons under the old tent, here at the graveside he spoke quietly, talked at length of how he and Carpenter had become friends during the first war.

How they stayed in touch over the years.

Then he looked directly at Jac. “Your father loved you, son. He’s in a better place now.”



Jac stared at the old fat man dressed in his cheap, out-dated suit standing there, having the audacity to tell him about his father. Shouting the cold heartless man didn’t love anything—except maybe the army—crossed his mind, but he held his tongue, played his part.

He focused on the mental picture of his mother, crowding all else in his head. It made him wish again she had lived. He needed more tears. Wasn't that what's expected at funerals? But he didn't want to cry.

Celebrating would be more appropriate. Jumping and cheering. Hold on, he told himself, this too shall pass. Got to hold on just a little longer.

The preacher said amen, and everyone filed past the flag-draped coffin. It relieved him they couldn't open it. He didn't want to see the colonel again, ever. And he could sure forget about the old man waiting in heaven.

First off, he was sure he wouldn't be going, and couldn't imagine they'd allow his dear old dad past the Pearly Gates either. Oh, he fully expected to face him again all right. One day in hell.

Someone eased Jac to his feet. He shuffled by the casket and tossed the carnation he'd been squeezing. As the crumbled flower landed atop the spray, the pride and love he'd once embraced for his father surged to his heart.

For a sweet moment, he toyed with forgiveness, but ended up snuffing the sentiments. He pushed them into the black place. The man he loved had died years ago, right after he became a civilian; when he could have finally spent some time with Jac. The jerk in the casket should have died in the last war.

Ambling slowly toward the family car, he stepped carefully, avoiding the graves. Sick of all the well-wishers and their hypocrisy, he glanced over the crowd. Why would so many show up?

The colonel may have been a war hero, but he wasn't a good man or a good father. They stood around in little gloomy huddles.

Sheriff Burnley talked with the old man's red-eyed sister. She nodded, daubed an eye, then looked straight at Jac. The lawman walked toward him. Fear crawled from his bowels. He knew the lawman's reputation. Everyone in town did.

Inhaling, he raised his chin, and braced himself then marched toward the man he'd been dreading. Meet the enemy head on and make him yours. That's what the colonel always said.

"Hello, Sheriff."

"Boy." Burnley stuck out his hand. "Why'd you do it?"

As he shook it, he stared up at the man, not sure he heard him right. "What'd you say, Sheriff?"

"Why'd you kill your dad?"

His head spun. He had to say something. "Are you crazy, sir? I . . . I loved him. Can't believe you'd think I could hurt the colonel."

"Cut the bull, kid. We both know you blew his brains out. I just want to know why."

Looked him straight in the eye, Jac hoped he'd back down, say he was sorry for thinking such horrible a thing, but the idiot didn't look away, only moved closer.

"Way I see it, you got two choices, son."

There was no spit to swallow, but he swallowed anyway. The dryness exaggerated the reflex. "What are you talking about?"

"Tomorrow, either you join the Army and clear this county for good, or I'm filing murder charges."

The idea of joining the army sent a stabbing pain into Jac's gut. The military had ruined his dad. His temples throbbed. "Go ahead, you crazy old goat. File your charges. 'Cause I'd just as soon cut my limbs off 'fore I'd join the Army. I hate the military."

Burnley nodded. "Like I said. Your choice. I'll be seeing you tomorrow, son. Best get yourself a lawyer." He headed toward his cruiser.

His heart pounded. Would he really do it? Could he prove it? He watched a second then ran after him and grabbed his arm. "Wait." Burnley faced him. "Why you doing this? I didn't kill my father."

The sheriff held up one finger. "First, suicides fall into several categories. Your father didn't fit in any of 'em." Two fingers went up. "Second, the colonel was so full of booze, he couldn't have raised the gun much less aimed and hit his head. Third, the angle; it's all wrong. Fourth, suicides always leave a note."

He paused holding up four fingers.

"Want me to go on, or have you reconsidered?"

Could the man hear his pounding heart? Jac tried to ignore it. "Maybe if you don't think it's suicide, you ought to be out looking for the killer instead of lollygagging around here accusing me."

"Don't need to. We both know who did it, and I'm pretty sure why. But, you see, beatings or not, I can't have a cold-blooded killer in my county."

Trapped. All his muscles went weak. "Why the Army?"

"You'll see."

Better the Army than life in prison.

"What am I going to tell everyone?"

The lawman smiled a victor's grin. "Oh, you'll think of something."

He watched the sheriff drive away. Relief flooded his soul. Someone understood, and the only price he'd have to pay was a stint in the military. After living with the old man, that would be a piece of cake.

Chapter Forty-two



uddy leaned against the doorjamb.

Amanda sat in the middle of her bed dressing one of her baby dolls. Bathed in pink, from the walls to the lacy curtains, her room smelled like a flower garden. “Didn’t your mother tell you it was bedtime?”

“Oh, Daddy.” She batted her dark lashes with the femininity of one much older than eight. “You know I can’t go to sleep till you tuck me in.”

“That right? What do you do when I’m gone?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Promise not to tell?”

He stepped to the side of her bed then leaned over and kissed her on the nose. “I promise.”

“Sleep with Mama.”

“You do?” He opened his eyes as wide as he could.

“Yep. It’s our deal. Me and Mama are bed buddies when the real Buddy’s off preaching.”

His fingers counted little ribs as he lifted her like a tater sack squirming and giggling, then pulled her pink eyelet spread back. Propping her on his hip, he marveled that her bare feet dangled almost to his knees. She was growing way too fast for his liking.

“Well, the real Buddy is home tonight, so guess you’ll have to settle for this, little missy.” He handed her the doll.

“Daddy.” Amanda pursed her lips and wrinkled her button nose. “You should know by now. Her name is Jenny.”

“Well forgive me, Jenny, for forgetting your name.” He kissed the

baby's porcelain head then swung daughter and doll. "One." Amanda squealed with delight. "Two."

"Don't drop us, Daddy."

"Three." He released her to fall into bed on her pillow, still clutching Jenny. "Arms up." She reached for the sky, and he tucked the covers around Amanda and Jenny. "I love you, Mandy."

"I know you do." She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed.

"But you need to go to sleep now." Her hug lingered, then he kissed her again. When he raised up, he pulled her halfway out of bed.

Little fingers, fiercely locked, refused release, but poking her ribs always had the same effect. Self-preservation forced her to fight him off. She fell onto her pillow a mass of giggles. "Goodnight, Princess."

"Night, Daddy." He backed to the door and flipped off the light. "Daddy?"

"What?"

"Can I sleep with you and mama?"

He retreated a step into the hall. "Not tonight, baby."

"Tomorrow night?"

Another step. "We'll see. Now go to sleep."

"How can I with you talking so much?"

"That does it, girl. One more peep, and you'll never see eight."

Amanda giggled and pulled the covers over her head. "Ooooo. I'm so afraid. Sweet dreams, Daddy."

"Sweet dreams to you, too, and don't let the bedbugs bite."

His footsteps sounded retreat, but his daughter hollered after him.

"Daddy, Can I have a drink?"

"No."

"And a cookie? Please?"

Buddy turned his back. She would do anything not to go to sleep. The last pathetic 'pretty please' that pierced the otherwise stillness made him contemplate getting her a cookie and a glass of milk, but only for a second. He spoiled her too much as it was.

"Amanda. I said no. Now go to sleep, and don't forget your prayers."

"Meany."

She could have the last word. Time had come to talk to his wife. Couldn't put it off any longer. He found her bent over a set of books in the little corner of the kitchen she used as an office and pulled out a chair.

Her pencil worked across the ledger. "You spoil her too much, Buddy." She didn't look up.

"Not any more than I spoil you."

She put the pencil down and flashed him a coy smile. "You do

spoil us both, don't you?"

"I try."

She blew him a kiss. "Let me finish this, and I'll be ready for bed."

"Bed's definitely on my mind, but there's something we need to talk about first."

"Can it wait ten minutes?"

"Sure, finish what you're doing. I'll be out on the porch."

"I'm so glad you're home, Buddy." She smiled. "I love you."

"I know you do."

A pained grin taunted her lips, then she quickly returned to her figures.

Standing at the porch's edge, he stared into the distance. If only Abigail was Sandy. He let his angel's image fill his thoughts for a minute then chased them into his secret place.

That hidden room in his heart where things were perfect, and he and Sandra were together for eternity. A nice fantasy that would never come true.

The front door opened. Abby kept the screen from slamming. "So. What did you want to talk about? You need another donation?"

"No, matter of fact, I made expenses and had a little left over."

Buddy held out his arms. She stepped into his embrace and kissed him on the cheek. "That's good. I'm glad to hear it. So. What's on your mind?"

"Eli Everman." He spread his arms and stretched. "He was in Tulsa last week."

"Really? How's he doing?"

"Great. Just bought himself a bigger tent." Buddy pointed at a chair, and she sat. "He wants me to tour with him."

She leaned back and stared. "What did you say?"

"Said I'd have to think about it." He sank into the chair across from her.

"What's he going to pay you?"

"Said he'd send you a guaranteed two hundred a month, then split the take-after expenses, minus the two hundred."

The money wheels spun in her eyes. She'd inherited her father's business sense and never missed a chance to pad her bank account.

"Twenty-four hundred a year. Plus a bonus?" She pursed her lips, reminding him of his daughter's earlier expression. "Hmmm. He must be doing very well."

"Doesn't have a pastor or deacon board handling his offerings."

"That's true. The last Sunday I went with you, there was at least a hundred and fifty in the collection plate, but they only gave you twenty lousy bucks."

"Yeah, but what can I do? If I say anything, the word gets out,

and no one ever invites me back.”

“When does Eli want you, and how long would you be gone?”

“He was headed to Detroit to pick up a new truck he’d ordered. Wants me to meet him in St. Louis next week.”

The money wheels spun faster. “A new tent and a new truck. He must be packing ’em in.”

Buddy didn’t answer. The Lord had always supplied his needs. What he wanted was to preach and sing. He loved the doing of church, but hated the business of it. Bless the Lord. This looked like an answer to his problems.

“How long would you be gone?”

“He takes all of December off and two weeks in the spring. Said you and Amanda could travel with us during the summers. Oh, baby. I don’t know. I’d love nothing better than to have a tent again, but . . .”

“You could pray about it.”

“Just don’t know if I can stand being away that much.” He looked off. What he didn’t know was, could he trust himself? Except for Sandy, he’d been faithful to his wife.

“Needless to say, Amanda and I will sorely miss you, but if we can be together in the spring, all summer, and the whole month of December . . . we could all get by. Money-wise, I just don’t see as how we have a choice.”

His wife’s statement took a moment to sink in. “I don’t understand, Abby. I thought the gin was doing good.”

“It’s stayed afloat since Daddy died, but mama . . .” She patted Buddy’s knee. “I just can’t keep her anymore. She’s getting so bad. Why, I spend more time here than I do at the gin.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“I decided to put her in the Meadows, but didn’t know where the money was going to come from. This sounds just like the Lord’s provision to me. Isn’t God good?”

The relief in his wife’s eye’s kept Buddy from questioning her decision. He loved having Mama Baxter live with them, but her mind didn’t work too well anymore, and the burden fell to Abigail.

“Guess it’s settled then.” He leaned over and rubbed his cheek against hers. “Now, weren’t we discussing going to bed earlier?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter Forty-three



uddy joined Eli in St. Louis.

Akin to going home. Church buildings were great, but praising the Lord and preaching the Gospel in a tent was the best, the very best. The hectic pace didn't give him much time to think about anything other than his next sermon.

Though he missed his girls, at each stop, a stack of their letters waited, then before he knew it, tinsel and twinkling lights draped everything. Eli headed toward Georgia.

December off in Dalton suited Buddy fine, but he was more than ready for the old evangelist to come back. Twelve weeks with six stops in three states sped by. Before he realized it, three more months passed.

The hired hands loaded the last tent pole, and like a kid hankering after his favorite fishing hole who had one last chore first, Eli pointed his new GMC toward Dalton to drop Buddy off.

"Arkansas and the banks of the White River are calling my name. Can you hear it, son?" the old man asked more than once while they hurried toward Georgia at the breakneck speed of fifty miles an hour.

Dalton's city limits sign appeared nestled in front of a stand of pines. Buddy turned toward Eli. "Where do you want me to meet you?"

"Dallas. Take a cab to the fair grounds. I'll arrive the morning of the fifteenth. Make sure you're there no later than the seventeenth. I wouldn't want you to miss the first night. It's always something really

special.”

A provocative eight-by-ten glossy of Sandy flashed across Buddy’s inner eye. She was the only thing special in Big D. “Dear Lord. Not Dallas, Eli. Anywhere else.”

“I’ve been doing two weeks at the Texas fairgrounds every spring since the centennial in ’36. It’s a big deal to a lot of folks.” The old man downshifted, braked, then turned onto Buddy’s lane.

“But I can’t go there. Sandy lives in Dallas.”

“Well, bless my soul. Is that what you’re worried about? It’s been seven years, son. Have a little faith.” Eli grabbed Buddy’s forearm and squeezed. “Why, that girl’s probably forgotten all about you by now.”

Studying the floorboard too long, he shook his head. “No, she’s not forgotten me. You don’t get over the love of your life.”

The GMC came to a stop in front of the old Baxter place. “Didn’t you tell me she was married?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“See? Nothing to worry about.”

The two-story house didn’t seem quite as much like home. Even Abby’s appearance on the porch with raven-headed Amanda on her heels didn’t relieve the new knot in his gut. While his wife dried her hands on an apron, little Mandy sprinted to the curb.

“Daddy.” Her arms spread wide. “You’re home.”

He jumped out of the truck and caught her in a twirling embrace. Home? Was he?

The azalea hedges on either side of the wide front steps blazed once again in spring’s fuchsia glory. Sturdy and straight, the faithful magnolias kept their glossy green vigil.

The place was familiar all right, and the precious arms of his daughter wrapped around his neck like a scarf on a blustery winter day, but home? Buddy didn’t know where that elusive place of peace might be.

The antebellum two-story sure didn’t seem like his castle.

The next two weeks, he tried his best to keep all thoughts of Dallas and Sandy out of his head, enjoy his time with Abigail and Amanda, but the devil brought such vivid memories, such undeniable stirrings.

The goodbyes at the rail station offered no relief for his anxieties. Maybe he would look her up. Just call to see how things were going. What was the guy’s name? Harry Prescott or something like that.

The closer the train chugged toward the Texas state line, the more difficult it became to resist temptation. The last hour of his journey, he prayed.

“Give me strength, Lord. Keep her away.” ‘Lead me not into temptation’ repeated again and again through his prayers. But he

couldn't keep his thoughts from their room at the Browder House and his angel on the bed.

God help him. He still wanted her more than his next breath.

Once the services were back in full swing, the wanting eased. When the power came, and he gave himself over to it, nothing else mattered. He lived for those times alone with the Holy Ghost.

But after such bliss came the lonely nights in Eli's cramped little trailer. Sandy entered the bedroom in his mind. He hated himself for not slamming the door. At least he hadn't really cheated on Abigail, but the Word talked about what you did in your heart.

He wrestled the devil every night.

Thirteen days crawled by. Only one more to go, and they'd be gone. He'd be safe. That afternoon it hit him. Sandy would be there that night. It wasn't exactly a Word of Knowledge, but he knew it just the same.

Marching to the trailer, he banged on the door even though he knew how the old man loved his afternoon nap. If Eli was going to preach, he needed time to prepare a sermon.

The aged evangelist didn't respond. Buddy opened the door. "Wake up, Eli. You've got to preach tonight."

He sat up and rubbed sleep from his eyes. "Huh? Who? What'd you say, son?"

"I can't preach tonight. You're gonna have to."

"Why? Something wrong? You don't look sick."

"I'm not. I just can't preach tonight."

Eli threw back the quilt and hefted his legs over the bed's side. "Tonight's the last one, Buddy. The tent'll be packed. I don't know what's gotten into you, but you've got to preach. Much as I hate to admit it, you're the one they come to hear."

"I know, Eli. I know." Buddy shrugged. "But something bad's going to happen if I preach tonight. I can feel it."

He wrapped an arm around Buddy's shoulder. "You're God's man. He won't let anything bad happen." Eli squeezed. "Just you see. Everything'll be fine. That is, if you get up on that platform. It's your name on all the flyers, and you're the one they expect to see."

Like a rabbit in a snare, Buddy yearned to bolt. The man spun him around and stuck his bulbous nose in his face. "We have a deal, son. Why, you're the reason I bought the new tent and truck. You've got to preach. We're all counting on you."

He stared into Eli's washed-out eyes, then hung his head. No doubt, he was right. They had a deal. Maybe his imaginations had run wild. After all, she hadn't showed so far.

"Okay." He raised his eyes. "I'll be there."

"That's more like it."

While the faithful filled the tent, Buddy sat motionless, staring just over their heads. Even though he kept telling himself Sandy wouldn't come, his stomach maintained a different truth.

Waves of nausea tossed what little dinner he'd eaten. His throat threatened to quit letting air pass, and cotton balls padded the sides and roof of his mouth.

Why did he think she would come? Maybe she hadn't even heard about the meetings or wasn't even in Dallas anymore. The arguments helped his mind, but his heart wouldn't believe. Help me, Lord.

It was time. Buddy marched to the podium. He nodded to the musicians. The drummer struck his cymbals then beat out a double time rhythm. He threw back his head and sang.

Twice through the song, the darkness in his soul abated. She probably wasn't coming after all.

After twenty minutes or so of jubilant heartfelt praise, little gold sprinkles tinted the tent's roof. He let the last song fade without starting another. All eyes turned to him.

The glow above brightened, and golden sparkles dripped here and there over the congregation. "Pray," he hollered. "Pray in the Holy Spirit. Let your prayer language rise up like sweet incense to God."

A hum of known and unknown words melded into a single buzz. The golden glow spread, encompassing his vision. The hairs on his arms and legs raised on chill bumps as an inner warmth cascaded through him.

The congregation became a blur in the twinkling golden flush; all except for one teen-aged girl, who remained crystal clear. The sparkles framed her innocent face as she became lost in her prayers.

In Buddy's heart, he heard her sing a new melody.

The glow faded.

He stepped down off the platform and walked up the center aisle. The congregation's praying quieted then stopped completely. He raised his arms and seated the people with a gesture as he stopped beside the girl's pew. He pointed at her.

"Stand up, Miss."

The girl looked quickly behind herself, to both sides, then back to him. She raised her eyebrows and pointed to her chest.

"Yes, Evie. Stand up, please." She rose slowly. He held his hand out. "Come here. Stand beside me."

Her eyes widened as the blood drained from her face. "Why me? How'd you know my name?"

Not taking his eyes off her, he scooted in. "Evie, the Lord wants you to sing."

"I can't." She shook her head. "I've never sung alone in church."

Buddy took her hand and lifted it over her head. "The Lord says

He's given you a new song. He'll help you. Just open your mouth and release it, Eve. Give it back to the Lord."

The girl drew a deep breath then tentatively began singing the same song he'd heard in his heart of hearts. As her voice lifted sweetly to fill the silence, the tone and volume strengthened.

Releasing her hand—which remained in the air—he made his way back to the aisle.

"JOHN AUSTIN CARPENTER," echoed through his soul.

The clear soprano notes of Evie's song faded as the golden glow returned. Buddy spun around.

"JOHN AUSTIN CARPENTER," echoed again through his being. A young soldier unchanged by the sparkling caught his eye. The private stared back. An eerie lack of emotion dulled his eyes.

The glow faded. The congregation had picked up on Evie's chorus, and when he could see them again, they stood with hands raised heavenward, singing with the girl. Buddy glanced around then walked toward the soldier.

The young man stared straight forward. His long arms dangled at his side. The Holy Spirit moved over the worshippers, and the song drifted off. The silence lingered, then Buddy stepped closer.

"John Austin Carpenter!"

The hush deepened.

"Jac!" He shouted again and stepped toward Carpenter whose face was a mask. "Your grandmother loved you, Jac. So does the Lord."

"Amen," someone hollered.

"That's right. You tell `im, Preacher."

Buddy stepped closer. Sometimes, he hated his gift. Having to confront a sinner with God's words gave him no pleasure, but he couldn't deny the Spirit's urging. Buddy stared straight at Carpenter, but felt every other eye in the tent on him.

Exactly what they'd all come for!

The silence thickened. Not even a baby whimpered.

"Repent, Jac." The call reverberated in the stillness. Buddy leaned in. Not a muscle in the young man's face moved. "Oh, how different your life would've been had your mama lived."

Carpenter's left eye twitched. Compassion for the young man swelled in Buddy's heart, but he couldn't stop. He was the Lord's oracle, and this sinner needed to hear God's word.

"The colonel's blood cries out, John Austin. Repent. Repent and seek God's forgiveness." Buddy's voice boomed within the canvas walls.

Carpenter's eye stopped twitching, and his expression hardened. "Sir," he whispered. "I don't know who told you my name, but I have nothing to repent of. The only colonel I know commands my base, and

as far as I'm aware, his blood still courses through his veins.”

For half of a second, Buddy wondered if he had missed God. Could it be possible? No. He'd seen the golden glow. This soldier lied. Then an image of Carpenter holding a gun to Buddy's head flashed across his mind's eye.

A shiver danced up his spine. “You're a liar and a murderer, John Austin, and unless you repent, you'll burn for eternity.”

Carpenter's lips thinned to a malignant grin. “And you, sir, are a charlatan and a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing who feeds on the superstitions of ignorant and low-class people.”

Buddy backed away.

The man grabbed the hand of the dumb-struck girl next to him and pulled gently. “We're leaving, Mary.” Together they made their way to the exit. Just as the couple reached the open passageway, Buddy cried out.

“Sergeant Carpenter.” The young soldier froze in the doorway and looked back. “When you charge up Pork Chop Hill, you'll cry out to heaven, but God won't be found. . . not that day or any other. . . until you repent.”

Buddy stood motionless. Tears filled his eyes, and remorse flooded his heart. Carpenter's glaring eyes met his, then the private spun and marched out.

A woman in the back row stood.

No, God. Sandy. His stomach convulsed. His head spun.

The part of him that knew she would come took over. He stared at her until she walked out. He hated the weakness in himself. The least he owed her was an explanation, a proper goodbye.

Glancing around at Eli, he walked out after her. Carpenter and his girl pulled off the lot in an old Dodge, throwing gravel as they sped away.

“What an arrogant idiot you are.”

Buddy wheeled around. She stood just beyond his reach with her hands on her hips.

“Hello, sweetheart.” He stepped closer, and she held her palms out.

“Don't you dare come near me. I was going to leave, but I couldn't without telling you what a yellow-bellied, snake in the grass, gold plated liar you are.”

“I love you, Sandy.”

“Love me? Mercy, what nerve! Love me. Why—”

“I swear it's true. I've loved you from the first.”

Her hands dropped, and she shook her head. “No. You don't love me. You only love yourself, Buddy Nightingale.”

“No, Sandy. You're dead wrong.” He reached out. “I don't love

myself, not at all. And you are the only woman I've ever loved."

"Mama always said actions speak louder than words."

"I was a fool, baby." He spread his arms. "I should never have taken you to that barn." Another step brought him into her space. He reached out and touched her arm which she snapped away.

"Barn, huh? You should never have taken me to the barn? What about the Browder House in Dallas, you fool? You were already married." The daggers spit from her eyes fell spent to the ground between them, never striking their target.



An unbearable pain in her heart took their place. Her voice lost its force. "You didn't even tell me. Let me believe there was a future." Tears wet her cheeks. "How could you, Buddy? How could you?"

Suddenly too exhausted, too drained to resist, she let him take her hand.

"I couldn't help myself. I looked across that train station and couldn't believe my eyes." His eyes misted. It sounded like the truth. He reached over and wiped a tear from her cheek. "Everyday for three years, I had missed you, wanted you."

"That I can understand, but—"

"I do love you, Sandy." He stepped closer, almost touching, and she didn't pull back.

His ice-blue eyes melted her resolve. He really did love her. At least that hadn't been a lie.

A brief thought of Harry, so far away, urged her retreat, but Buddy's closeness—how could she deny the passion lit in her soul? He was there. She was there. True love refused denial.

Oh God, forgive me.

He drew her in and gently kissed her.

Why was it so hard to stay mad?

Why had life gone so wrong? She tilted her head and looked up. As her eyes locked with his, her arms wrapped his waist. "I hate you, Buddy Nightingale."

"I know, baby. So do I most the time."

Chapter Forty-four



even years of desire pressed Buddy.

Eighty-four months of missing her built beyond retreat.

But mere seconds into the afterglow of love, the enormity of Buddy's sin jerked him from the moment. What had he done? A tear rolled down his cheek.

How could loving her be so wrong?

Oh Lord, forgive this sinner.

Sandy pulled the sheet over her shoulder and snuggled into his side. "Oh, Buddy, I love you so much."

"I know you do, and I love you too, sweetheart." He kissed her forehead. Why hadn't he stayed away? He knew better. The Spirit tried to warn him. If only he'd listened, not let that smooth talking Everman talk him into preaching, he wouldn't be there.

Why hadn't he?

"I only wanted to see your face again." She closed her eyes with a contented sigh. "I'm so glad you came to Dallas."

A dim light shone through the crack of the slightly ajar bathroom door, illuminating the hotel room with a soft glow. He studied her, memorizing each line and curve. The smell of her filled his senses—the love of his life.

Dear God, what was he going to do?

Like a forgotten name remembered, his answer came. Not as something from himself, but from the depth of his spirit, the secret place where only he and the Lord ever went.

Heavenly merciful Father, please let there be another way.

Deep into the night, while she slept, he prayed and begged the

Almighty for a reprieve, but Holy Spirit within him remained silent. She was another man's wife, And Abigail waited with his daughter in Dalton.

The Good Book made no bones about it.

The Lord hated divorce.

"Oh Father . . . how can I live without my angel?"

New tears stung his eyes. The bed covers rustled. Buddy wiped his wet cheeks. Sleepily, she reached across the bed, found his leg, and pulled herself tighter to his side. In minutes, her rhythmic breathing resumed.

A slight smile hinted of a sweet morning dream. He reached to touch her face, but stopped short.

He wanted her, would have done almost anything to go back to that day in Cypress Springs—the day he met her in the barn. But he couldn't, and no matter what, the past couldn't be changed.

Slipping out of bed, he gathered his clothes and soft-footed it into the bathroom.

Nothing that hard had ever been asked of him, but he knew he must obey—flee, get away from Sandy—and get right again. Out of habit, he grabbed the toilet handle then cringed at the sound of water rushing down.

When he opened the door, Sandy, propped on an elbow, grinned. "Come back to bed."

"Can't. I've got to go."

Her smile faded. "You can't leave me, Nightingale. We belong together, and you know it."

"I've got to, sweetheart. Only one choice. Besides . . ." He stopped himself. How could he explain? His heart trembled and threatened to stop beating if he walked out.

"Besides what?" The pain in her eyes ripped his heart anew. "Don't you dare tell me you love your wife. I know better. You couldn't love me the way you do and still love her."

Desire stronger than before coursed through him. Everything in him wanted to tell her to go home and pack her bags, but he couldn't go through life out of God's will. Slowly, he shook his head.

"You're right. I don't love Abigail, at least not the way I love you, but neither she nor my daughter is the main reason I can't stay." He tucked in his shirt. "I have to follow God."

"Hypocrite."

"Never said I was perfect. We all fall short by His measure, but I know where peace comes from, and that's walking hand and hand with the Master."

"All I have to say is that if you walk out that door, don't you ever
—"

“Ever what, Sandy? You're the one who hunted me down. I didn't come looking for you.” It came out too sharp. He walked slowly toward the door, willing himself to obedience. His hand grasped the knob. He turned it then looked back.

“I love you, Angel. I always have.”

She wrapped herself in the sheet and rolled out of bed. “Buddy? Please don't leave.”

She moved to within inches. He wanted to hold her, make everything right, but being with her could never be right. That, God had made crystal clear.

“Please, not now. Not when we finally found each other again. You know we should be together forever.”

He opened the door and stood there, neither in nor out. “There's nothing more to say, Sandy.”

“Liar!” She dropped the sheet and pounded his chest with both fists. “You filthy liar. You say you love me. You're nothing but a big old baboon liar.” She stopped hitting him and grabbed his shoulders.

Her eyes begged, beckoned his heart.

“You wouldn't leave if you loved me. Forget all that holy roller brouhaha and marry me, Buddy. We would be so happy, so right. We belong together.”

His knees wobbled. A knot rose to his throat. He remembered the scripture ‘In your weakness I am made strong.’

“I can't. And you know it isn't brouhaha. It's the whole truth and nothing but the truth. You know it's wrong for us to be here, but I couldn't resist. I'm weak. I admit it. But I have to go for both our sakes.”

The words caught in his throat. Gently grasping her wrists, he pulled her hands off his shoulders then turned away. “I do love you,” he whispered before he closed the door behind him.

Through the closed door, her words accused him as he hurried toward the staircase. “I know you love me, Buddy Nightingale! I've known from the start!”

From inside, something banged against the door. “You'll be back! You—you self-righteous pig! I know you'll be back.”

Her voice faded as he descended, but he could still hear her sobbing screams.

“You can't stay away. We belong together.”

Somehow, he made it to the first floor then out the hotel's front door. The crisp spring morning represented the absolute opposite of everything in him. The cold emptiness, a dark void made him shudder.

His spirit cried out for God's help, and his heart began to warm. A robin plucked a fat worm from a sidewalk crack and took to the sky.

Thinking on the Lord's faithfulness, he found a small measure of joy in his strength—that he left.

But with cartoon characters sitting on either shoulder—one red with horns, one white with wings and a halo—voices argued in his mind. More than once, he stopped dead in his tracks, contemplating going back.

Without a doubt, she was the love of his life. God Himself had confirmed it, but then . . . his bad choices ruined everything. He loved her from the start, and no matter how many times he tried to expunge her, she remained in his heart.

In a sigh, he breathed a prayer.

"Lord, create a clean heart in me. Don't cast me away from Your Presence, and forgive me. Keep me from temptations."

In his mind, he heard, 'You can't live the rest of your life without her. Who are you trying to kid?'

"Get thee behind me Satan," he whispered.

Blocks clicked off. By the time he reached the fairgrounds, his pain had eased to a tolerable level. Before Eli's trailer came into view, Buddy heard shouting. A strange foreboding overshadowed him.

Had Sandy lied about her husband being out of town?

"Where is he, old man?" the angry voice grilled.

"Told you already, young man. I don't know, but God knows. Maybe you should ask Him. How long's it been since you prayed anyway, son?"

Buddy peeked around the edge of the trailer. The young soldier from the last service charged. Buddy stepped out. No problem after all. He had handled the kid once, and he could take care of him again.

"Hey!"

The boy stopped and turned.

"You looking for me, Jac?" Shock registered on the young man's face, but not as much as on his friend's.

"Yeah, you bet I am." The soldier faced him square. His eyes spit fire. "I don't know what your daddy told you about me, but I didn't kill the colonel, and I won't have you saying I did. You understand?"

Buddy stared into the threatening eyes. "You don't want to add bearing false witness to your list of sins."

"Curse you, Nightingale. And curse your crazy old man. I hope both you self-righteous hypocrites rot."

A vivid picture of Jac being whipped then holding a revolver to a man's head and pulling the trigger flashed across Buddy's mind. In that instant, he knew the whole story as though he had written the script.

"Jac, the Lord knows about the beatings, why you thought you had to kill your father, but it's still a sin. You need to repent, son."

Carpenter lunged. A right cross connected with Buddy's jaw. He whirled and fell flat. The soldier loomed over him, both fists clenched.

"I am not your son, and I never murdered anyone though you might make a great candidate. If you say I did again, I'm going to knock all those holy roller lies right out of you. You got it?"

Eli sprang to the young man's back and wrapped both arms around him. "Call the cops, Buddy."

"No." He pushed himself to his feet. "Let him go."

"You sure?"

Buddy nodded, and Eli released Carpenter who backed a step. "I meant what I said, preacher. You keep spreading lies, and you're a dead man."

"Go back to your base, Jac. You've got enough troubles without worrying about me. I'll do you no harm."

He backed away, glaring, until he reached his old Dodge. "Consider yourself warned." He jumped in and sped off, throwing gravel.

"Mercy. That boy could've just as easy killed you."

Buddy looked after the car until it disappeared from sight. "I don't think so. It's eating him up that he killed his father." He turned to the older man. "But I doubt I've seen the last of him."

"Don't know about that. What I do know is that we've got to be in Sherman and set up by six this evening, so let's get the lead out."

"Can't, old friend." He shook his head. "I'm going home."

"Don't give up, son. You might have messed up last night, but that don't mean you have to stop preaching God's word."

"I'm leaving soon as we get the money settled. I've got to quit—for a while at least. Get Sandy out of my heart, if that's possible."

"Son, quitting would be the biggest mistake you've ever made. Preaching the gospel is what God created you for. He's given you a gift. And the way you sing . . . if I didn't know better, I'd think I was listening to an angel."

"Some angel, huh? I can't keep my eyes off the women or my mind off Sandy. I'm telling you, I've got to quit for a while. I'll be needing my money."

Eli laughed, a snorty kind of knowing chuckle. "What about our deal? I've got a tent and truck to pay for."

"We made enough the last two weeks to pay for two of everything. Give me my money, Eli. I've got a train to catch."

The old preacher shook his meaty jowls. "No, sir, we didn't. You don't understand how expensive holding a meeting is."

"Yeah, sure, because I've never done that. Tell you what, you just give me what you think is mine."

He stared for a long minute, then nodded and disappeared into the

trailer. A few minutes later, he emerged with a wad of folded bills held tight by a rubber band. He studied the money as if trying to figure out a way to keep it, then tossed it over.

"There's twenty-seven hundred, change there. You're welcome to check the books if you want."

Hefting the roll, Buddy judged its weight. Before he could protest, Eli, the trailer and everything else disappeared into a golden glow. Goose flesh ran up his spine and down both arms.

Instantly, Buddy knew to the penny how much the old man had shorted him and where it was hidden. A vision of the aged preacher being lowered into a fresh grave amidst a handful of dry-eyed onlookers flashed across his mind's eye.

So clear, as if it happened yesterday; he knew when the old man would pass. The glow faded, and everything returned to normal. Compassion rose in his heart. He turned away.

Eli grabbed his arm and spun him around. "What'd you see, boy? Tell me now and tell me true."

Buddy clinched his teeth until the words burned his tongue. "I saw your heart, Eli, and I know to the penny how much money you've cheated me out of and that the cigar box is hidden behind the towels."

He paused trying to hold the rest, but it, too, burned his mouth, insisting they be spoken. A tear welled in his left eye.

"Then I saw you in the ground, dead and cold, with no one to mourn. What few kin showed stood around acted like vultures, waiting to pick your bones."

His jaw dropped slack, and he shook his head, but his bloodshot eyes told Buddy his words had pierced the old man's crusty heart. Eli's grip loosened. Compassion welled in Buddy, and he almost felt sorry for him.

Suddenly the meaty fingers dug into his flesh, and the man shook his arm. "It isn't true, son. Not true. The devil's lying to you. I may be a lot of things, but I ain't a thief. I'm God's man; born and bred, same as you."

Gently Buddy pried the thick fingers off his arm. "Never mind the money." He held up the wad. "This is more than enough." Buddy backed away, wanting only to be done with the old evangelist and get back to Dalton.

"Wait! Let me get you some more. Anything you want. Just—" Panic filled Everman's eyes. "Pray for me, Buddy. Look again. Tell God to give me more time."

With a cocked brow, he took another step backwards. "Doesn't work that way. The Lord shows me what He wants when He wants. Never when I ask."

The worn preacher stepped closer and mouthed please.

“Wouldn't do any good. He doesn't show me much, but what He does, always comes to pass. There's nothing I can do about it.”

The old man's shoulders sagged as though panic had given way to a certain acceptance of the inevitable. “When?” he whispered.

“Go home, and get your affairs in order.”

“But when? Do you know?”

“Do you really want to know?”

He hesitated a moment, then nodded.

“September 8th, just before sunset.”

Everman sank to his knees and spread his arms skyward. “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” He covered his face with his hands, bowed low to the ground, and cried like a baby.

A part of Buddy wanted to comfort the old man. Tell him he may have made a mistake, but he knew better. The familiar golden glow had visited, and Eli Everman was going to die.

As certain of that as the sun rising in the east, Buddy lingered only a moment then turned his face toward downtown. An east-bound train pulled out in forty-five minutes, and he planned to catch it.

Chapter Forty-five



“ood grief.”

Sandy slammed the receiver into its cradle. It bounced onto Harry's mahogany desk. Immediately, she picked it back up, put it to her ear, then stuck her finger in the rotor again and pulled.

The wheel took a maddening amount of time to go around.

A sickly sweet nasal voice answered. “Operator.”

Her face grew warm, and already her jaws ached from gritting her teeth. “Yes, Operator. I was cut off.”

“I'm sorry, ma'am. What number were you calling, please?”

Sandy told her then drummed her fingers on the desk pad. Where was Harry? He was supposed to be home two days ago. Oh, why wouldn't they just put her through?

“Hello. What number are you calling?” a different voice asked.

The first operator gave the number to the second. A series of clicks and static assaulted Sandy's ear before a male voice asked, “Number, please?”

“I swear! How many times are you government imbeciles going to ask me for the number?” She changed ears. “This is Mis'ess Harrison Prescott, and if you don't get my husband on this line immediately, I promise, someone's going to pay.”

“Mis'ess Prescott, I'm sorry, but that isn't possible at this time.”

“Don't tell me that. I'll have you to know the president has eaten at my table. Is it going to be necessary for me to contact Truman? I'm sure he wouldn't mind calling my husband to the phone.”

She hated the way she sounded, but nothing mattered right then except getting Harry home. And soon.

“I’m truly sorry, Mis’ess Prescott, but at this time a call to the president wouldn’t even help.”

“Why? Where is my husband?”

“Mis’ess Prescott, please be patient. A government representative should call on you shortly.”

“Oh God. Has something happened?” Could he be dead? A speck of light shone in her turmoil. “Sir, you better tell me right now. What’s happened to my Harry?”

“Nothing. I assure you. Captain Prescott is fine, but like I said, just be patient. You will be contacted soon.” More static rattled through the line, and then a dial tone droned.

How dare he hang up! She put the phone down and bit her bottom lip. For a second, a morbid relief had swept away her fear, then the man had said Harry was fine. She hated herself for even thinking it.

But not as much as she hated Buddy Nightingale.

Oh, why had he ever come to Dallas?

His words haunted her. He hadn’t hunted her down. That was so true. She’d made the effort. Why couldn’t she have been stronger? Why couldn’t she forget him once and for all? She sank back into Harry’s chair.

Maybe she wasn’t pregnant. It’d only been ten days.

Surely Harry would be home tomorrow or the day after.

Everything would work out. She tried to convince herself she wasn’t carrying Buddy’s child, but knew better. Every morning, waves of nausea kept her running to the commode, and her breasts were so tender it hurt to even wear a bra.

Her father’s stern face floated before her. A wail, half bitter anguish, half uncontrollable rage burst forth. “Ahhhhhhh.” She clamped her jaws shut and covered her mouth, shutting off the scream.

Her life was ruined. A heavy sigh lifted then dropped her shoulders.

Standing, she wiped the tears, and tucked her blouse back into her skirt. Over and over, she thought of asking God for help, but how could she? So many times she’d begged before—then gone ahead and done what she knew she shouldn’t.

It would certainly insult Him to ask again.

“Get ahold of yourself, Sandra Louise. Things could be worse.” She walked out of Harry’s study. “After all, it isn’t like you’ve got a terminal disease.”

What could she do to stay busy, keep her mind of it? The rest of the morning, she spent cleaning out and rearranging her bureau drawers. The activity helped suppress her fear and frustration to manageable levels.

Still too frequently though, she found herself gritting her teeth. A dull headache kept her company.

As promised, that afternoon an under-secretary of the State Department arrived at the door with a letter. He opened the screen and handed it to her. Recognizing Harry's script, she tore the seal open.

The screen door slammed behind her as she walked toward the living room, unfolding the letter.

"Uh-Hum." The gentleman at the door cleared his throat. "Excuse me, ma'am?" She turned toward him and raised her eyebrows. "Captain Prescott directed me to await a response."

Sandy motioned him in then continued to her favorite overstuffed rocker where she curled like a kitten. The man stood in the doorway, his feet slightly apart and his hands behind his back.

Sweetheart,

*Sorry about all the secrecy, but Truman's asked me
to accompany him overseas. I can't say more or you
and I both would be in violation of national security.*

*This trip might have historic significance, Sandy.
Please understand and forgive my extended absence. I
can't wait to come home.*

All my love,

Harry

Sandy wadded the letter. "So where is he?"

"I don't know, ma'am, but if I did, I couldn't tell you."

An urge to lash out at someone, anyone almost, overwhelmed her. Slapping the tight-lipped government lackey crossed her mind, but that wouldn't get Harry home any quicker.

"Is there to be a reply?"

Cocking her head slightly, she stared. He held her gaze for a moment then averted his eyes. "I suppose so." He looked back. "You tell Prescott I said to get home to me. He can play with Mister Truman some other time."

The government representative's lips thinned, forming a slight smile. "Yes, ma'am. Will that be all?"

She nodded. The man dipped his head, turned, and walked toward the door. "Wait." He faced her. "Tell Harry I love him."

The soldier didn't smile, but she caught a twinkle in his eye. "Which Harry?"

"You can tell them both, if you've got the guts."



Standing on his father's porch, Buddy stared at the horizon. The last rays of sun streaked over the cedars and live oaks. "Tell me, Dad. How did you do it?"

The elder Nightingale laughed. "Do what?"

"How'd you quit drinking?"

"Came down to a choice, Son. I picked the Lord over the booze."

Oh, if it were only that easy.

"But it just isn't that simple for me. God knows my heart—that I'm committed to Him—but I cannot get Sandy off my mind. I want to be with her so bad sometimes, I don't think I can stand it."

The old man eased himself out of his rocker. "Well, I'm going to fix some dinner."

He grabbed his father's arm. "But what am I going to do?"

"Choose, I said. For the past week, I've been telling you the same thing. If you're hanging around here, waiting for me to change my advice, you might as well give it up and go home."

"But—"

"You need to confess and repent. To God and Abigail. Tell her what happened. Ask her forgiveness."

"I can't. It'll kill her."

"Yes, you can; and no it won't."

Of course, the old man was right. Shine light on his sin, bring it out of the dark secret places where he coddled it. He'd known all along what his father said made sense, but could he really tell his wife?

"Then choose, Son, never to go back."

He lingered in Pine Bluff two more days then caught a ride back to the Austin station. He'd told Eli he was going home, but home—what a confusing place.

When his train from Dallas had pulled into the state capital, he'd immediately detoured, most likely hoping his father would tell him to follow his heart, but of course, he hadn't.

Oh Lord, go before me. Soften her heart and make things right.

All aboard, the train pulled away from the station then toward the Texas border. In no hurry to arrive in Dalton, he repeated the prayer many times then again as he paid off the cabby and stood in front of the two-story home.

But not his home.

Why, Lord? Why do I have to hurt her? He waited a second, but no answer came. The front door flew open. Amanda ran across the porch, squealing.

"Daddy, you're home."

He knelt and spread his arms just as she launched herself. He

caught his daughter, hugged her tight, and kissed her cheek. "Oh, baby girl, I've missed you so much."

He hefted her to his hip and walked toward the house. Abigail met them at the door. "Mandy, get down. You're getting too big for Daddy to carry."

"Oh, Mom. I am not."

"Mind your mother, sugar doll."

She smirked and rolled her eyes. "Do you two always have to stick together?"

"Yes, we do, young lady. Your mother and I always stick together."

"Do we?" Abigail gave him a sideways glance as she removed her apron. What did she know? Had Sandy called? No, she wouldn't. Eli. The old goat told her to get back at him. Abby handed the apron to Amanda.

"Finish drying the dishes for me, sweetie."

"Do I have to?"

"Please, Mandy. Your father and I need to talk."

His daughter looked at him with pouted lips, but he nodded her toward the kitchen. "Okay, but I don't want to." The screen slammed, and she disappeared.

"Eli called a week ago. Wanted to talk to you."

Buddy backed away a step. "He did? Say anything else?"

"Not much." Her eyes misted. "Where have you been, Buddy? Eli said you left Dallas almost two weeks ago. That you said you were coming home."

Words stuck in his throat. He hoped he could have had some time to find just the right moment. "I was so close in Austin, I went by to visit Dad."

"But why'd you leave Eli? Was it for good?"

"Yes. He's getting old; there's not many more revivals left for the famous Eli Everman, I'm afraid. He's lost his appetite for souls. It's all about the almighty dollar these days."

"But why didn't you come on home? I've been so worried."

How could he find the words? The truth was the only thing that could set him free. "Abby, I . . ." Tears blurred the cracks between the boards of the porch. "I have to tell you something, but I don't know how." He looked at her face.

"What is it?" She took his hand and led him to the swing. "Did Eli do something?"

He sat beside her. "No, this is all on me. What I've done." He buried his head in his hands and wept. Abigail had been a good wife. It killed him to hurt her. "I've—" He sniffled then leaned back.

"What is it, Buddy?"

How could he? He faced his wife. "I've been unfaithful."

Tears instantly filled her eyes. "With who?"

"You don't know her."

"Well, I didn't expect to, Buddy. Who was it?"

"Someone from my past."

She stood and walked the length of the porch with her arms folded across her chest. About halfway back, she stopped and stared with such anguish in her eyes. "Sandy?"

How did she know? He nodded.

"I tried to talk Eli out of even going to Dallas, but he wouldn't listen. Said we had a deal. Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

The gardenias' perfume suddenly nauseated him.

"Do you love her?"

Buddy looked away. "I can't lie to you. Not now. Yes, I do still love her. I suppose I always will."

Abigail turned her back. "Fine. Pack your bags."

"No. I'm not leaving." He stood and took her shoulders. "You said I didn't have to love you when we got married, remember? But I do. I do love you, Abigail. You're my wife."

She turned. "What are you saying, Buddy? You can't love us both."

"Why not? I didn't want to see her. I even tried to beg off preaching that last night. I just knew she would be there. I didn't want to, but I did. Eli insisted, but I shouldn't have listened."

"So it's Eli's fault again."

"It was like I couldn't help myself, but now I can. I'm done with her, just like Dad gave up booze. I'll never be unfaithful again."

"You don't know that." Her words were sharp, but her eyes begged for hope.

"Yes, I do."

"How can you?"

Standing, he took her hands into his. "Easy. I'll stay here in Dalton with you. I'll work at the gin or wherever. We'll go to church together, be a regular family."

The tears flowed down her cheeks. Her bottom lip quivered so badly she stuttered. "D—d—do you mean that?"

"With all my heart. I chose to marry you, Abigail."

She stared into his eyes. Everything in him wanted to wrap his arms around her, but he didn't dare.

"No more meetings?"

"Not a one unless you and Mandy go with me." He held out his arms. "Please."

She hesitated then slipped into his embrace. "I love you, Buddy."

“I know you do.” She stiffened. “And I thank God you do. I love you, too, sweetheart.”

Chapter Forty-six



T

he days crawled by.

An inch worm on a twenty foot cedar could've won any race. Sandy's curiosity had been pricked, but even wondering what the two Harrys were up to couldn't overcome the gnawing dread that plagued every waking moment.

It haunted her dreams.

Even if Harry had come home when he promised, it would have only delayed the inevitable. Be it known: your sins will find you out. Her father's words dogged her like an odious prophecy of doom.

Almost eight weeks passed since Harry's note, without another word.

The rising sun found Sandy reclining on the back porch. One foot rubbed a measured beat against the other as she sipped her coffee. Her thoughts were halfway around the world.

According to the *Dallas Morning News*, the two Harrys were indeed making history. She finished the lead-in and fanned the thin newspaper print over to page eight for the rest of the story.

If only for a moment, the thrill of it took her mind off her own troubles. She read and re-read every word, hunting for Prescott.

"Hey, sweetheart."

Sandy jumped then looked in the direction of the greeting. Her husband grinned from the doorway.

"Harry! What in the world are you doing here?"

"I know it's been awhile, but don't you remember, baby love? I live here." He covered the few steps that separated them then lifted her off the chaise lounge. "I've missed you something terrible, my

dear.”

He swung her around in a circle, holding her tight then stopped spinning and kissed her gently. “It’s so good to be home.”

“I’ve missed you too, Harry!” She kissed him back. “All this is just too exciting. Tell me all about your trip. Are the Russians as barbaric as everybody says?”

Harry carried her into the house. “Later. First things first.” He proceeded to their bedroom, kicked the door shut behind him, then tossed her onto the bed’s rumpled covers. She laughed as she bounced, but the mirth quickly died.

He brushed off the shoulder strap of her silk gown and dropped a hand down on either side of her. She shied from his touch, then pushed him away.

“Don’t, Harry.” Self-hatred and guilt couldn’t allow intimacy without confession.

He pivoted and sat next to her on the bed. “Don’t?” His fingers combed her flaxen hair. “What is it, Sandy? What’s wrong?”

She shook her head and covered her eyes with her forearm. “Please. Just leave me alone.”

“But I’ve been gone so long. This isn’t like you. Tell me what’s happened.”

Oh if only everything could just be like it was, but nothing would ever be the same again. She moved her arm and looked out the window. “I’m sorry, Harry. I am so sorry.”

Grabbing her hands, he pulled her to a sitting position and knelt in front of her. “Sandy. What are you talking about? What could you be sorry about?”

Her lip quivered. She had to tell him. Tears filled her eyes.

“What is it?” Harry pulled her toward him and wrapped her in a tender embrace. “Tell me, baby. Whatever it is, we can handle it. Together, we can handle anything.”

Could they really handle this together? Would he ever forgive her? She snuggled to his chest and took a deep breath. With borrowed confidence, she whispered, “Oh, I hope we can, husband. I’m pregnant.”

He slid his hands to the small of her back and leaned away. “What did you say?”

“I said I’m pregnant. I’m going to have a baby.”

Harry let go and stood. Forever flitted by before he spoke. “Who’s the father?”

“You are.”

He retreated a step. “We both know that’s a lie.”

“Sweetheart.” Sandy slid off the bed and moved toward him. “It could be true.”

"I asked you a question. Who is he?"

"What difference does it make?"

"I've got to know the truth, Sandra." He walked to the window and stared out. "Does the guy look anything like me?"

The pained expression on his face cut her heart. Of all the people in the world, that dear and gentle man would be the very last she'd ever want to hurt. Always her knight in shining armor, he didn't deserve this. She bit her lip.

Her voice quivered. "No."

His shoulders heaved. The knuckles of both his fists changed to a pasty white. She took a step toward him, but he backed away. Her fear vanished, but instead of relief, a self-loathing filled her soul. His anguish was so deep, so apparent.

"How could you do this to me?"

"It had nothing to do with you, Harry."

Anger flashed from his eyes. "It has everything to do with me." He came toward her, fists still clenched. "Who was it? Answer me. Some bum you met in a bar?"

Sandy retreated. She'd never seen this look on Harry's face. "I haven't been to a bar since we were married. How can you say that? I never . . . I only . . . I'm sorry, Harry. Truly sorry."

Though she wiped them repeatedly, a steady stream of tears wet her cheeks.

"Can you answer my question?" He shook his fist. "Who was it? I want to know who!"

She backed into the closet door.

He loomed over her, fists raised. "Who have you been whoring with?"

Would he hit her? Her eyes fell to the floor. "Buddy. It was Buddy Nightingale."

"The preacher?" Harry lowered his fists. "The same jerk who wrote you the Dear Jane letter? I thought the guy was married."

"He is."

"Do you still love him?"

"No. I hate him, Harry. I swear. You're the one I love." He walked over to a chair and fell into it. She crept up behind him and massaged his shoulders and neck. "I love you, Harry. Please believe me. It was a horrible mistake."

"Actions speak louder than words. Isn't that what your mama always said?"



For the first few weeks, Harry pretended nothing had happened, though he couldn't bring himself to return to Washington. Sandy's abdomen expanded daily, and his charade couldn't be maintained much longer.

His wife grew Nightingale's child in her belly. First Admiral Smith, then Truman himself called, but he couldn't leave, not then, maybe not ever. He had to decide.

From that first night, his dreams had been tormented by images of his wife with her preacher. And the passage of time didn't help.

Though summer's green turned red, orange and yellow along the banks of the peaceful creek that ran past his home, he remained impotent against the bad dreams, like a man forced to watch his wife's rape.

Soon enough, the fall colors fell and covered the ground, leaving branches and vines bare and stark against winter's gray skies. Each night, he fought sleep and the inevitable nightmares.

Each night they visited again more vivid and perverse than the last. Finally, six weeks before her due date, it started.

He didn't sleep.

Instead, he spent the night in his chair by the window which overlooked Turtle Creek. "Nothing wrong with a man sitting and thinking all night. At least that's what he told himself the following morning.

The next night, he lay in bed with his eyes closed until he heard her soft sleep sounds, then opened them, staring at the silhouette of her huge stomach outlined in the moonlit window.

The clock read two-twenty. He sneaked out of bed to the refuge of his chair. The man in the moon cast his pale light along the creek banks, turning them into a maze of cavernous lairs.

Nightingale lurked somewhere out there. Out there in the shadows. Harry was certain. Wife stealers always came in the night.

After they turned off their new television the third night, his beloved begged him to take a sleeping pill, which he did, but he still didn't rest.

The following morning he bound from his chair at daybreak and stretched his arms, fists raised, invigorated.

His mind twirled a kaleidoscope of colorful images; mercifully, none of his wife with her lover. Rather, he remembered in vivid detail the grand childhood afforded by his mother in that very house.

How he wished she were still here. She could have kept Sandy safe.

As the neighborhood lights went out that evening—the fourth since he slept—Harry returned to his window seat. A tattered quilt swathed his shoulders, the one he'd wrapped in as a little boy.

Mother never let him sit at the window then. That seat wasn't made to sit on.

Ha! Then why call it a window seat?

The reflected light sprawled across the lawn casting dark macabre shadows, eerie, almost ominous, predicting something would happen, something evil. Sandy's protection consumed him; he must keep her safe from that devil.

Why had Satan's servant chosen his beloved to impregnate?

"Why?" he asked aloud. The bedroom door pushed open. Harry didn't look. The sight of her huge belly would only bruise his heart again.

"Harry, please."

"Go away, Sandra."

"Please don't do this."

"Do what, my dear?" He stared out the window.

She walked around and knelt in front of him. "You know what. Please take the pills. They'll help you sleep."

He looked at her. So beautiful. "But why?"

"Because you've got to get some rest, my love."

"Don't want to rest. Want to know why you gave yourself to the devil. Why did he choose you?" He looked into her face. "Well?"

Closing her eyes, she leaned back on her heels, only accentuating her condition. He looked away.

"Oh, Harry, why torture yourself?" She grabbed his knee and squeezed. Her nails dug into the flesh. "I don't love him! Why can't you believe me? It's you I love. You!"

"Then tell me why you spread your legs for that—that—" He clamped his jaws together, couldn't think of an appropriate curse word for Nightingale.

Wiping a tear from her cheek, she stood.

The mental picture of his beautiful wife inviting that demonic preacher into her bed took hold, and a murderous rage consumed him.

In the last five months, he'd thought of a hundred ways to kill the no-good. He pictured giving Nightingale's severed head to Sandy for Christmas, even went so far as to make a few inquiries.

But none of his scheming offered any balm for his pain.

His wife carried another man's child; her swollen belly, his constant reminder.

"Here, Harry. Take them." Sandy stuck her open palm with two small white pills toward his face.

He knocked her hand away, scattering the tablets. "Get away from me."

"You're driving me crazy, Harry! I can't take any more! I've tried! I've really tried, but you have to try, too, if we're going to make this

work.”

He studied her face, hunting a clue, the key. If only he could figure it out. “Tell me why, Sandra. Why did you do it?”

“For God's sake, Harry! Stop! Quit tormenting yourself. What good is it doing?” She lifted his hand and cradled it in her own.

He glared into her eyes. “Your belly's full of another man's child, and you dare touch me?”

Sandy jerked her hand away. Tears trickled. “Oh, Harry . . . dearest Harry . . .”

“The truth. For once and for all, tell me why.”

“But I don't know! I don't know why! I just went! I just did it!” She stormed over to the bureau and picked up the prescription bottle. “It was wrong. I've admitted it. I told you I was sorry. There's nothing more I can do.”

She threw the pill bottle at him. “Now take the pills. Get drunk. Beat me. Leave. I don't care. Just do whatever you need to do to get over this before you destroy us both!”

The pain in her voice, for a moment, made him toy with the logic of her words. True, he needed to put it all behind him. Maybe he would take a pill. Maybe two . . . or five. A little nap might be okay.

Hadn't he stood guard long enough?

Bending over, he retrieved the prescription bottle. Opening it, he spilled several pills into his hand. Maybe he should take them all. A very long nap might be in order. Then he scooped all but two back in, then popped on the lid.

She brought the water glass from her bedside table. Her housecoat draped open, exposing her distended abdomen, so full her belly button had popped out. An image of Sandra Louise rushing to Nightingale flashed in his mind.

He jumped to his feet and threw the pills at her. “Whore! You're nothing but a whore! Get out of here and leave me alone!”

Sandy stopped. Some of the water spilled over the glass. She stiffened. “Please, Harry. This is ridiculous. I'm not going anywhere, and I'm certainly not a whore.” She extended the drink. “Now you've got to sleep. You'll go crazy without rest.”

Would he? Wasn't he already? Could a person be more crazy than crazy? He stared at her. Images from bygone days swirled in his head. He'd been so happy then. At least that's what he'd always thought.

Apparently, he harbored a false conception. Had it ever been true?

“Didn't you even think about the consequences? Or did you just not care?”

“I'm through talking, Harry. Far as I'm concerned, everything's already been said. I'm going to bed.” She hung her housecoat on the closet hook. “I'm tired, and I can't go without sleep.”

Slipping in between the sheets, she rolled, facing away from him, turned the bedside lamp off, and pulled the covers over her shoulders. "Goodnight, Harry."

Several minutes passed watching her, then he returned to his chair. Her image, sleek and trim, danced before his eyes, but whenever she got close, and he would try to grab her, the image flitted away, always beyond his reach.

He closed his eyes, willing the pictures to vanish. He thought of the war and the Russians, their leader, but a vision of Sandy came mocking, cuddling to Stalin's side, touching him. Harry jumped to his feet and rubbed his eyes.

She loomed there before him. Slowly, she turned her back and trotted blithely toward a bed full of men. Skipping toward the adulterous nest, she shed her clothes as she floated onto the bed.

One of the men stood on his knees and stared at him. Nightingale!

"She's married to you," he said, "but she loves me."

"No. She doesn't love you. She loves me!"

Sandy curled around the man's knees. The other men finished her undressing. She wrapped herself around the man, caressing his chest as she, too, rose to her knees.

"Then why is she in my bed, Prescott?"

Harry lunged at the nightmare man. The bed vanished, and he found himself sprawled on his own bedroom floor. He sprang into a crouch, fists balled. He searched the darkness. Nightingale was there. He'd seen him.

Sandy moaned and rolled onto her back. Harry retreated to the closet, never taking his eyes from the quilt-covered mound that lay atop his wife. Nightingale! By George, he'd found the adulterous preacher man!

How cunning. The monster hid in their bed. Who would think to look there?

He pushed his suits aside and pulled down the leather case from its special hiding place. Slowly, he opened the box. His service revolver rested where he'd left it years before. He swaddled his hand around the cold steel and hefted the weapon.

Its weight felt exquisite to his fingers. He caressed the cartridges then lovingly fed them into the cylinder.

The preacher must be stopped. He had to die. Harry rested the gun against his leg as he crept toward his target. Sandy rolled to her side, facing him. The weapon's barrel rose level with her midsection.

"Nightingale!" He cocked the revolver. "Come out, you coward, and look me in the eye!"

His wife's head jerked up from her pillow, eyes open wide.

"Harry. What—? Is that a gun?"

“Quiet.” He put his left index finger vertically across his lips. “I’ve got to kill the snake-in-the-grass, or he’ll never leave us alone.”

She pulled her knees up, her shoulders down, and wrapped her arms around her belly. “Harry. Please don’t hurt the baby. Put the gun away.” She eased one hand toward his.

“Baby? There’s no baby. Why do you insist on lying? All the time! You’re lying! It’s Nightingale hiding in your stomach like the worm he is. The worthless bum’s just waiting for me to go to sleep so he can take you again.”

“No, Harry. Buddy isn’t here! Don’t hurt the baby! The baby is not Buddy!”

The image of his wife with Nightingale flashed before him again. His guts knotted, spewing more bile into his soured stomach. A vice closed on his heart. He tightened the pressure on the trigger and bent to within inches of her face.

Her breath smelled of fear.

“Couldn’t be a baby, Sandy, now could it? We’ve tried for years, haven’t we?” He pressed the gun barrel harder against the adulterous mound and whispered savagely. “But no little blessings. Am I right?”

He willed his finger tighter, but it rebelled. Sandy lay her hand over his and tugged. For a second he resisted, then allowed her to pull his pistol hand toward her face.

“If you’re going to shoot someone, shoot me. I’m the one responsible. I went looking for Buddy, he didn’t come looking for me.”

Harry released the pressure from the trigger and jerked the pistol toward the ceiling. “Don’t lie to me. He hunted you down, seduced you. Women are so easily deceived. Now I’ve got to kill him before he does it again.”

The gun’s muzzle pointed again at her stomach. She oooched up in the bed and clutched a pillow. Her body heaved with soundless sobs.

“Please,” she cried. “Please don’t.” Tears and snot dripped off her chin. “It’s my fault. I’m to blame. I went to the tent meeting looking for Buddy. I just wanted to see his face. I deserve whatever you want to do to me.”

She’d gone to see his face?

“But, Harry, the baby hasn’t done anything.” She wiped the back of her hand across her nose then sniffed. “You wouldn’t hurt an innocent baby, would you?”

“Why, Sandy? Why did you?”

Her eyes flashed. The muscles in her jaw tightened. “Because . . .”

“Because why?”

“Just because.” She pleaded with her eyes. “Please don’t make me say more. You don’t want to hear it, Harry. It’ll only hurt you.”

Compassion touched him when he saw the pain in her eyes, easing some of his own heartache. Had she been trying to protect him after all? No matter. Whatever it was, he had to know the truth.

“Why, Sandra? If you know, then tell me.”

“Buddy was the first and the best.” She lowered her eyes. “I didn’t go to the revival to make love with him, but once we spoke, once he touched me, I was putty. I’m so sorry, but you’ve never been able to touch my soul, not the way he did. No one has.”

Her words, though delivered flat and emotionless, stung all the same.

“Then you lied. You really do love him.”

“No, Harry. I hate him. I swear. I hate him with my whole heart. Sometimes I think he’s the devil himself.”

“Liar.” Harry raised the gun.

“Fine!” She flung the pillow across the room, exposing the grotesque bulge beneath her gown. “Go ahead, Harry. Shoot. I’m so tired. Let’s get it over with.”

At the same instant, he squeezed the trigger and jerked the gun sideways. The blast reverberated, and the flash lit the room for an instant revealing horror on his wife’s face. She screamed and fell over on the bed.

Showers of plaster and sheetrock pelted her.

He walked over to the wall and stuck his finger into the bullet hole. Have to fix that in the morning. Nightingale might try and crawl in through it. He grabbed a fistful of Sandra’s hair then lifted her face for inspection.

Her eyes never opened. Gun-powder burns discolored her cheek, but not much other damage.

Still holding the smoking revolver, he retreated to his chair at the window. Shadows lay across the lawn like a spider’s web. Maybe the ducks would be out soon. It would be okay. The web would be gone by then.

Harry loved the ducks.

The gun slipped from his hand then clattered on the floor. He took a deep breath and smelled fear and gunpowder. Strange. He hadn’t smelled that combination since the war. But he was home.

Why would his bedroom smell of gunpowder and fear? His vision blurred, then became crystal clear. His mother took his hand.

“Come, Harrison. Time for your nap.” She pulled him inside.

“Harry?” A distant echo called.

“I can’t come to play now, Sandy. Mother says it’s time for my nap.” He didn’t hear his words with his ears. How odd.

“Harry?” The dreamy echo, almost too faint to hear, called again.

“Come back tomorrow, Sandy. Maybe Mother will make us

chocolate chip cookies,” he answered silently.

“Harry!” Sandy screamed as if just outside his bedroom window, but he ignored her. It was nap time, and he was so sleepy.

Chapter Forty-seven



andy dropped a nickel into the phone.

She dialed the operator and rubbed her temple. The pounding eased, but not much. Her swollen ankles throbbed.

Pressing both hands against the small of her back, she arched it the wrong way, and her rounded belly flattened against the glass wall of the telephone booth. The extra inches didn't allow maneuverability enough to sit in the idiotic box.

“Long distance, please.”

Static and clicks assaulted her ears, then a distant voice crackled. “Operator.”

“Hello? Operator?” She shouted over the static, but the line cleared, leaving her speaking too loud. “Excuse me. My name is Sandra Prescott, and I'd like to make a collect call.”

“What city, please?”

“Cypress Springs, Texas.”

“And your party's name?”

“Harris. John Harris.” She waited. Frustration bordered on panic, eating away at what sanity she clung to. She was so weary of aching feet. Contractions, irregular all morning, wore her endurance beyond thin, and poor Harry.

Oh, Buddy! She cursed him again. He was the reason for all this. Why had he ever come to Dallas? Why did he say he loved her, had always loved her? She never should have listened to his lies. He—

“Hello.” Her father's voice boomed in the receiver.

“I have a collect call from Mis'ess Sandra Prescott. Will you accept

the charges?"

Sandy's stomach knotted. The bridge of her nose tingled as her sinus cavities and tear ducts filled.

"Of course."

"Papa? It's Sandy." She didn't want to cry, hated to ask, but didn't know what else to do. "Papa?" Her voice cracked. "Can you bring Mama to Dallas? I just don't know what to do anymore." She cleared her throat. "I need help."

Silence followed, then finally, he spoke. "What's wrong, Sandra Louise?"

"It's Harry. He's—" Blast. The tears burst out. "Oh, Papa. He's real bad, and the baby's due, and I can't . . . Please come and bring Mama."

"Slow down, girl, and tell me what's happened."

"Harry . . . he . . . he's having a bad time." She choked back a sob. "Please. I need y'all."

"Okay, okay. We'll come. Tell me where you are and what's exactly wrong with that husband of yours."

Sandy wiped her eyes and sniffed. "In Dallas. We're at Timberlawn, it's . . ." She hesitated as if telling him would make it permanent. "The doctors say Harry's had some kind of breakdown."

"A nervous breakdown?"

"I . . . I guess so. He's . . . It's like . . ." Her voice quivered, and she could barely whisper it. "He thinks I'm his mother, and that he's a little boy again."

"Where's Timberlawn?"

"It's a special hospital on Samuel Boulevard, not too far east of downtown. It's a private hospital. Uh..." She blew her nose on a lace edged hanky. "It's for the mentally ill, Papa."

"Okay, Sandra. We'll be there as soon as we can."



Triangular shapes of emerald green merged with soft pink squares then softly collided against blue circles. Harry loved the blues best. From the collage, Nightingale's face materialized and grew until it blocked all else.

The hideous image wavered, distorted, then laughed. Huge white teeth encircled by exaggerated, opened red lips led to a black tunnel.

Harry fell and plummeted into his tormentor's ridiculing cackle. Rage shook him. He balled his fists to swing, but something held his wrists and arms. He screamed and tried to kick, but his legs couldn't move.

That good-for-nothing preacher floated closer. A medicinal stench

gagged Harry. He blinked and tried his hardest to focus as his wife's baby's father's red eyes mocked him. But he wasn't a man. Everything blurred.

He screamed, the face disappeared, and the kaleidoscope returned. Harry loved the colors. The shapes slid around and around and changed every time. They were so pretty.

"Mother, come here. Come see what I've got." He looked around, but the colors vanished. He tried again to move, but couldn't.

"Mother! Where are you? Come help me. My arms and legs."

Something held him. He raised his head until his chin touched his chest. Over a white sheet that covered him, brown straps held him down. He liked brown, but not as much as blue. His mother always said blue looked best on him, set off his eyes.

Her eyes were blue, too. He wanted to be just like her, wanted to get up and find her, but he couldn't move. Was it only the straps that held him down, or was he a cripple?

"Mother, please."

Her soothing voice came out of his fog. "I'm here, sweetheart, right here."

"Thank goodness." Harry relaxed. "I thought I was lost, or you left me. Why didn't you come? The colors were so pretty, and then—" He paused, remembering. "Wait a minute. Where is that low down snake in the grass?"

"Who, darling?"

"I saw him just a minute ago."

"Calm down, my love. There's no one here but us, just you and me." Her words drifted to him.

Oh how he loved his mother! So much. She was the most beautiful woman in the world. When he grew up, he would marry her because he never wanted to leave her. Somebody else walked into the room, then a sting pricked his arm.

"There now. Try to sleep, darling. You need to rest."

The colors danced with the shapes on her words. He loved them almost as much as his mother. "Will you sing me a song, please?"

"Sure, my darling. If you close your eyes, I'll sing. Which song would you like?"

His eyelids shut tight. "Sleepytown."

"Do you want to take a trip, and go to Sleepytown? It won't take us long to get," his mother rubbed his hair as she sang, "over to Sleepytown, but you have to close your eyes and pull your lashes down if you want to go to Sleepytown."



Sandy sang until Harry's breathing slowed, then waddled to the door and knocked two soft raps. The male nurse in the hall unlocked it, then sank back into his chair. Round-the-clock care cost a fortune, but her husband deserved the best.

Poor Harry. It was all her fault.

Guilt tortured her for signing the admission papers, but she couldn't risk him hurting himself . . . or the baby. Another pain grabbed her mid-section.

Sinking into a nearby chair, Sandy wrapped her arms around her stomach. She couldn't go much longer. Loneliness and despair brought her to cry softly, while exhaustion shut her eyes.

A firm tug on her sweater's sleeve startled her awake. "Sandy? You asleep?"

Her head came up. She blinked, but her eyelids were so heavy. Someone knelt on the floor in front of her. "Mama? How'd you get here so fast?" She stretched her back and sat more erect. "Oooo." She rubbed her tummy.

Mother laid her head on Sandy's knees. "Oh my poor little girl. You look worn out. Tell us about Harry, honey. What have the doctors said?"

Papa helped his wife to a chair while he asked in an unnatural hushed hospital voice, "Do they know what caused this, girl?"

"No, not really. It runs in the family though. His father killed himself before we ever met, but Harry said his dad was in and out of hospitals like this one for years." Another contraction tightened her belly. She winced then moaned.

"Was that a pain, Sandy? Could you be in labor?"

"It's not quite time, but I just don't know. Maybe, I guess. They don't hurt too bad and aren't exactly regular, but . . ."

"John, check your watch and time these pains." She turned back to Sandy. "It could just be false labor since you've been under such a burden, but we're here now, and everything's going to be all right, honey."

"I know, Mama. I know."

"How long's this been going on?" her father asked.

"They've been coming all morning I guess, off and on."

"I meant with Harry. How long's he been like this?"

"Well, it started about six weeks ago. It's all such a blur. Harry hasn't been sleeping well. At first I thought he just needed some rest, but the other morning . . ."

Her bottom lip pouted out and quivered. She swallowed hard then tried again. "The other morning, he thought I was his mother. Started talking like a little kid, demanded Ovaltine for breakfast, so I called

our family doctor.”

“What did he say?”

“He straightaway contacted the specialist here.” She pushed herself up. “Excuse me a minute, I need to run to the restroom.” Before she ducked in, she grabbed her abdomen. “There’s another pain coming, Papa.”

When she returned, her parents were standing with their coats on. Miranda held Sandy’s out. “Here. Put this on. I’ve already talked to the nurse and told them we’d be back.”

“But where are we going?”

“To the hospital, baby. Just so your doctor can check you over. Have you got his number with you?”

Sandy nodded then leaned toward her mother and whispered, “When I went to the bathroom, there was blood. I don’t want to lose this baby, Mama.”

“No, no. That’s normal, child. Just a sign the little one’s on the way. John, you bring around the car. I’ll call ahead.”

David Robert Prescott arrived feet first, one foot at a time, on the seventh day of December, 1949, and weighed in at nine pounds twelve ounces. Due to excessive bleeding, the doctors kept Sandy almost a full week for observation.

The morning they came home from the hospital, her mother insisted Grandpa John go back to Cypress Springs, and he didn’t put up a fight.

Grandma took over all the household chores, delighting, Sandy suspected, in the trappings of Harry’s wealth. The two celebrated a lonely Christmas, and Father Time carried no joy to the Prescott mansion for the New Year.

Of course, her mama waited on her hand and foot and barely allowed her the daily ride to and from Timberlawn. Every day for two weeks, Sandy visited her husband, but saw no improvement.



White walls, tile floor, metal frame bed with white sheets; they could only mean one thing. Harry tried to remember, but had trouble concentrating. His temples pounded.

What he needed was a cup of coffee. He glanced at his wrist. Where was his watch?

“Hey,” he shouted to no one. “Where am I? What’s going on?”

A name played on the tip of his tongue, skipping just out of reach. Someone he should know, but couldn’t quite place. He rolled off the bed and tried to stand.

The pounding in his head intensified so that he cried out. Harry

stumbled toward the door and turned the knob. Locked? But why? He slapped the wooden door.

“Hey. What's going on?” He hit the door again, this time with his fist. “Somebody better get in here. Where am I?” Ice picks stabbed his temples. Retreating to the bed, he crawled in and buried his head beneath the pillow.

Slowly, the pain subsided. Harry rolled to his back and stared at the ceiling. Large white tiles with hundreds of random holes stared back. Two banks of lights illuminated the room with little help from a single tall window of thick, opaque glass.

The sound of metal against metal preceded the door's opening. “Good morning, Mister Prescott. I'm Doctor Perkins.”

Harry studied the man. Maybe sixty, a hundred and eighty pounds or so, gray hair, and a pointed silver goatee; definitely not military. A younger burly man stood behind the doctor, feet apart and hands in front, as though waiting.

“How are you feeling this morning?” The doctor stepped closer then pulled over the straight-backed chair. “Would you like something to eat? Some coffee, maybe?”

Swinging his legs over the bed's side, he faced the doctor. The pain in his head increased, but he ignored it. “Where am I?”

“Timberlawn Psychiatric Hospital.”

With his teeth gritted against the throbbing in his temples, he slipped off the bed. “I don't know how I got here or why, but you have three minutes to get me my clothes and a cab, or I'll have your license.”

“I'll be happy to get you your clothes, but you can't leave, not just yet.”

Rage rushed through Harry, masking the pain. He stepped toward the doctor. “You listen to me. I'm getting out of here, now. I would suggest you do everything in your power to assist me, Doctor.”

“Please calm yourself, Mister Prescott. I'm sorry, but we can't allow you to leave. Your wife should be here any minute, then we'll all sit down and discuss this. In the meantime, I'll explain what's happened up to now.”

His fists balled. The burly man took a step forward. “Do like Doc says and sit down, Mister Prescott.”

Nightingale!

Harry lunged, but the bigger man grabbed first, locked his hands in front of his chest, pinning his arms, then wrestled him to the floor.

“Curse you, Preacher! I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do.” Harry struggled against the orderly's weight. He kicked and flailed.

Squirming and twisting, he fought for his life and his love. Sandy's lover must die. The crazy pervert was obsessed with her. He would

never leave them alone. Harry wouldn't rest, couldn't stop fighting until she was safe.

He loved her too much.

Something sharp pricked his arm, but he continued struggling for a minute before everything slowed. He couldn't connect with himself. Suddenly, nothing mattered but closing his eyes.

Beautiful triangular colors, changing to squares, circles, and diamonds hung suspended on the back of his eyelids. How strange. He hadn't seen a kaleidoscope since he was a kid. Then his mind went black.



Remorse and shame weighed her down. Though she loved Baby David more than she ever dreamed possible, the tiny bundle in her arms failed to fill her emptiness. What was wrong with her?

Inside, she was hollow as a dry well and had reached the end of her rope. Something had to be done for poor Harry, and she had to figure out what.

Sitting in the bay window, she held back the drape. The winter bleakness of Turtle Creek matched her mood. It didn't seem at all like 1950.

Where had the ducks gone? Sandy loved watching them. They offered her solace, gliding along so carefree, so above it all.

Her mother carried a silver tray into the drawing room.

"Sweetheart, would you like some tea?"

"Sure, Mama." She continued staring out the window.

Miranda set the tray down and held out her arms. "Here, let me put the baby in bed."

"Thanks."

David stirred as she passed him to his grandma. In her mother's absence, the sorrowful conclusion of a major internal debate finally brought Sandy to a decision. She poured two cups of steaming water and dunked a tea bag into each.

When her mother returned, she steeled herself. "Mama," she cleared her throat. "I've decided to take Harry to Europe."

"Europe. Are you crazy, Sandra Louise? You're barely over giving birth, and traveling with a newborn will be no bed of roses." Miranda lifted her cup and nervously bobbed the bag in the hot liquid. "How in the world could you possibly handle Harry and still care for Little David?"

"But Mama, I have to do something. He's just getting worse every day. I can't stand seeing him like this. Especially since it's all my fault."

"Your fault? How in the world could you be to blame? His condition isn't your fault."

Sandy walked across the room and sat on the ottoman in front of her mother. "You don't know what I've put him through, Mama."

"Oh, I'm sure no more than any woman under the strain of carrying a baby nine long months. Anything you said or did wouldn't be enough to cause this, Sandra. It's surely more serious than that."

"It is, Mama."

"But you said yourself it runs in the family."

"Still . . . You don't know." Sandy returned to the window and pulled the drape back. Staring out, she calmed herself, deliberately lowering her voice and speaking slowly. "It's up to me, Mama. I have to get Harry some help. He's got to be all right again."

"But Europe, Sandra. Isn't there a good enough doctor in Dallas? I just don't see how you could do it." Her mother pressed her tea bag against the cup. "You've got to be realistic, honey."

"But—"

"No buts. You're a mother now with responsibilities." She blew her tea then took a sip. "Let's think about this for a minute."

"Mother. Don't you think I have been thinking about it? I know I couldn't handle Harry and David, but right now, my husband is to be my number one concern, has to be. He's so sick, and—"

"Sandra Louise. What in the world are you saying?"

A numbness dulled her mind. "What's so hard to understand, Mama? I said I've decided. Admiral Smith told me about a clinic in Vienna."

"But what about your son?"

"The last thing on earth I want to do is leave my baby, but right now, I've got to. For Harry's sake. I thought maybe you and Papa could keep him a while." Her eyes filled with tears. "I know it would be hard, Mama, but it won't be for long. I wouldn't ask if—"

"Leave little David? You'd leave your baby and go traipsing off to Vienna? Sandra Louise Harris, how in the world could you—"

"Mother. If you ask 'how in the world' one more time, I'll scream. I have to do what I have to do. If you don't want to keep the baby, fine. I'll find someone else."

"But, Sandra, there must be another way. What about someone to help? Hire a nanny. There's obviously enough money. Do something. Anything. But you can't just abandon your baby."

"It wasn't easy, Mama, but I've made up my mind."

Miranda set her cup on the coffee table and held her hand beside her mouth.

"My precious, you're going through such hard times, but do you really think it's necessary to travel halfway around the world? Why

not let Doctor Perkins try another one of those shock treatment? Wasn't there some kind of improvement?"

"Yeah, some, but since, he tried to kill one of the attendants. Besides, you weren't there. They're terrible. I'll never let them hurt Harry again. I can't. I won't." She wiped at the wetness on her cheeks.

"We'll figure something out."

"You just don't understand, Mama. I'd do anything to have Harry well again. He's such a wonderful man, and he's been good to me, so good. I never meant to, but I've hurt him bad." Sobs racked her as she melted into her mother's lap. "I just can't take David. You and I both know that. Besides . . . it'll be better for Harry."

"But David is Harry's son. He might be able to—"

"Oh, Mama." She sniffed and tried to stop crying, but her bottom lip quivered uncontrollably. The whole horrible story spilled out. Funny that her mother's expression never revealed anger or surprise or disgust.

Rather, only love and concern.

"I've messed everything up so bad. Can't you see why he has to get better? How can I live without Harry?" She kneeled in front of her and laid her head in her mother's lap. "Help me, Mama. Will you? Please."

Stroking the hair back from Sandy's forehead, her mother rocked gently. "Dear daughter, of course I'll help anyway I can, but we also both know a baby needs his mother. I just don't see how—"

"Mother, David will be fine with you. It won't be long, I promise. We'll be back before he even misses us. Please."

"Well, I guess I could talk to your father."

Sandy reached for the phone. "Call him now, Mama, but don't let him say no."

Chapter Forty-eight



T

he sergeant climbed out of his foxhole.

“Let’s go.” Jac Carpenter made himself obey. He didn’t want to, but sense of duty stiffened his legs. Up Pork Chop Hill he charged for the third time in as many nights.

While he ran in a low crouch, he glanced around at the men closest to him. More than half were strangers. He hated this stupid war.

A flare burst lit the top of the hill. The smell of death and gunpowder filled the air. He hated the stench, hated charging up this worthless pile of dirt. The first man to his left fell. Jac kept running.

An explosion on his right blew soldiers in all directions. A bloody piece of meat smacked his cheek. He wiped it off and ran. His lungs ached, but he continued up the hill. He didn’t know why.

Only knew he had to fulfill his duty to God and country. He tripped, then fell.

Another flare, one of theirs, burst over his head. The eerie yellowish light cast ghostly shadows over the pocked-marked hill. Days of fighting had denuded the landscape, leaving only useless dirt and rock with an occasional burned stump.

Jac crawled forward. He topped a little ridge and spotted a hole with another GI huddled in one corner. He scrambled over the side.

“Hey, pal.” He gathered himself tight against the shallow earthen wall. “Who you with?” The guy didn’t answer. Jac poked him. The man’s head lolled to one side. “Dead, huh? How long you been dead, pal?”

Another flare lit the sky. He pressed himself into the dirt. Duty.

Honor. Those words hung hollow on his mind. Was he doing his duty? Where was the honor in this insanity?

A grenade exploded just beyond his hole, followed by small arms fire. He pressed harder into his little piece of ground. "Oh God, help me."

The prayer died on his lips as the preacher's words screamed in his soul. "When you charge up Pork Chop Hill and you cry out to God, you'll not find Him that day or any other until you repent."

"I didn't kill the colonel." He held his fist toward the sky, shouting. "I didn't do it. He killed himself."

The heavens didn't answer.

With the battle raging all around, he heard only the small voice in his spirit.

REPENT

He toyed with the thought of begging forgiveness, but he couldn't. He didn't kill anyone, especially not his father. The part of him that knew the truth tugged at his heart, but he wouldn't have it. He was no murderer.

Hefting his rifle, he sprang out of his hole, firing wildly at the top of the hill. By rote, he reloaded; duty pulled the trigger, and honor pushed him forward up the hill.

"I!" He pulled the pin on a grenade. "Am!" He reared back. "Not!" With all his might, he flung it up the embankment. "A killer!"

The egg exploded. To his right, a North Korean materialized. Jac swung around and fired. The man fell. He ran toward him and fired again. "I am not a murderer!"

Firing another round with each step, he walked toward the piece of meat that minutes before had been a man. "Did you hear me, preacher man? I am not a murderer. I didn't kill anyone."

He emptied his rifle and reached for more ammo, but found none. The bloody mess at his feet gagged him.

He was a murderer.

He sent that man to his Maker just like the Colonel. He sank to his knees in the dirt. While the contest for Pork Chop Hill raged, he stared at the North Korean soldier.

Slowly the noise of war faded, and the smell of death vanished. He no longer was afraid. He'd found a place deep within himself where there was no duty or honor, only sweet nothing.



Trees outside the doctor's window blocked Sandy's view of the Danube, but the warm sunshiny day made her hope, made her ask.

"It's been almost four months." She fumbled for the right words.

“Since he—since he had a bad spell.” The doctor nodded, but made no comment. “Well, that’s progress isn’t it? Can’t I send for David now?”

Wolfgang Mozart Swindell, PhD, answered in his thick accent. “Certainly, you may do that, Mis’ess Prescott, but—” He dug into his inside coat pocket, pulled out a pipe, then continued to speak while he searched for a match.

“You should carefully consider that action, and—” The doctor paused to light the briar. As he puffed, he rose and walked around his desk, towering over her. “Weigh how it might affect your husband.”

Sweet smelling smoke drifted her way. “Do you think it would be too hard on him?”

“In my opinion, your son should remain in Texas. For now. For Harry’s sake.”

Hope was a four letter word. It flitted away, always beyond her reach, like the butterfly just outside the window.

Suddenly, she hated the sunshine. She hated the butterfly, and she hated Vienna. Things were never going to go right, no matter how hard she tried.

Her resigned sigh hung desperate in the silence.

Leaving David with her parents indefinitely wrenched her gut, especially in those quiet hours when her husband slept. The separation threatened to destroy every fiber of her being, but she owed Harry. She must see him through it, well again.

“I don’t know what to do, Doctor. My baby’s almost seven months old, and I haven’t seen him since he was born.”

“Of course, Madame, you have the same option now as you did then.”

“What? Choosing between my husband and my baby? Some option.”

Swindell sat on the desk. “Mis’ess Prescott, multiple personality disorders are difficult to treat, even harder to cure. Harry may never recover. At some point, you’re going to have to start thinking of yourself.”

She leaned back, a heaviness on her heart. “What if he goes another . . . say six months, with no incidents?”

The doctor returned to his chair and fumbled with his pipe. “Harry’s in a controlled environment right now. You know as well as I how fixated he is on this Nightingale. No matter how much effort you exert, eventually, he would find out the boy was here, and . . .” Swindell shrugged.

“And what?”

“Anything might happen. I cannot predict how he would respond, but I could offer some scenarios. The rage might consume him, at which point he might harm himself, you, or the boy.

“His child personality might gain control for the rest of his life. Who knows? Another personality could even surface. What I do know is that you've been the only one who can reach him.

“In my opinion, you balance his fate in your hands. I'm sorry to have to say these things, but it would be less than professional if I failed to. I want you to be able to make the best decision for you both.”

She studied her manicured nails, hating herself and Buddy all over again.

“Mis'ess Prescott?”

“Yes?”

“We all make our choices in life. It's the consequences that are most difficult.”

For six more months, Sandy lived in a two-room cottage on the hospital grounds. Before Christmas, she had sent a big box of presents back to the States for David and everyone at home.

As for herself, she ended up spending the cold wintry day alone and confused, in the depths of despair. How had her life gotten to be such a mess?

Doctor Swindell hoped in time Harry could join her as an outpatient. In the beginning, that encouraged her, and she bought a few things to make the cottage more homey, but her interest had long since waned.

Harry's unimproved condition hammered her into a state of severe depression, which her latest meeting with his doctor did little to alleviate.

How could she ever choose between her husband and her baby? Maybe she was ultimately responsible for Harry's condition, but why should her baby suffer? Certainly, he had done no wrong.

And Buddy was the one who got off scot free every time. He never faced any consequences, just kept on traveling and preaching, probably telling his lies to any girl who would listen.

Whenever she thought of Buddy, no matter how mad she would get, she wished she could see him again.

Just to tell him about David, see how he'd been doing.

Maybe she should try to— No! Why did he haunt her so?

She longed for the carefree life on Turtle Creek, sipping coffee and watching the ducks. She prayed for Harry's recovery, but knew she lacked faith. Deep into the cold winter night, she wrestled with her dilemma.

In the end, she faced reality. Just as dawn broke, she took paper and pen.

Dear Mama,

I miss David so much. How did things go over the holidays? Did Emma Lee and Travis get to come? I hope so. I was so sorry to hear she lost another little one. I wish the doctors could do something to help her carry to full term.

Poor Lee Lee. I don't know how she could stand it Again.

Did David like the things I sent? I can't believe he's already in a size two. It must be your home cooking. He's growing up so fast, too fast. I hate not being there with him. Missing his first birthday. Sometimes my heart hurts so bad I think I'll surely die.

Sometimes I pray to. Seems everybody would be better off if I'd never been born.

Mama, Harry's prognosis doesn't look good. The doctors think it may be years before he's well enough to come home. They also agree it would be a mistake to have David here.

I'm the only one who can calm Harry when he gets really bad. I just don't know what to do but to stay here and hope for the best, though I'm not so sure God will ever grant it. I deserve whatever He does, I know that.

I'm enclosing another check. I'm sorry to do this to you and Papa. I thought it would be a month or two. I hope my David's not too much trouble for y'all. Please kiss him and hug him tight every night for me. Oh, how I yearn just to hold him in my arms.

Please take lots of pictures with the new camera I sent for Christmas and mail them as soon as you can. The pictures you send are all I have of my baby, and you'll never know how much I treasure them. I miss him so much.

Oh, Mama, try to understand. I just can't abandon Harry. He's been so good to me, and I've hurt him so. Tell Papa I'm sorry, but I don't know what else to do.

Tell Lee Lee I love her and to write when she feels well enough. Poor sister. At least she carried this one five months. Maybe there's still hope. Just think, my little girl would be six years old now. Doesn't seem possible.

I pray I'll get to be with her in heaven someday. Do you think she'll know me? Do you think God can forgive me, Mama? Well, I better close now. I've been up all night and all of a sudden, I can hardly keep my eyes open. I love

you, Mama. Please don't hate me.

Always,

Sandy

Chapter Forty-nine



er husband slept off his latest emergency shot.

While he did, the old doubt poked out its head. Mentally, Sandy reached for it, but stopped short of taking hold. Instead of stuffing it back in its hole, she stroked the thing like a lap dog.

A full year wasted in Vienna, and Harry wasn't any better; maybe even worse. She retreated to her chair and gazed out the barred window.

What had possessed her to run off to Europe? Swindell didn't have any more answers than the bunch at Timberlawn. Her husband moaned and rolled over in his bed. Sandy rose, straightened his covers then kissed his forehead.

"I wish I could make everything right, darling." She pressed the call button then returned to her chair. Within minutes, a male nurse filled the door.

"Did you ring?" the man asked in a heavy accent.

"Get Swindell. I'm taking my husband home."

The nurse shrugged his broad shoulders then closed and relocked the door. Sandy relaxed; her decision was made. Now all she had to do was live with it. The first hurdle would be the trip halfway around the world with Harry.

Was she crazy to think she could handle him?

Well, she would have to because the thought of going home and seeing David outweighed any other argument these days. Oh, how she missed him. Just as she pulled out the latest pictures of her baby, Swindell walked in.

"Did Steve hear you right? Are you seriously planning on going

back to Texas?"

She nodded.

"Is that wise?"

"I don't know, but that's what I'm doing. I've only seen my baby once. I'm committed to getting Harry well, but I've missed David's first birthday, his first step, his first tooth. It'd be different if I saw improvement, but . . ."

The doctor closed the door and walked to the foot of Harry's bed. "You should count today only a minor setback. Mister Prescott is definitely making progress."

She shook her head. "I don't consider encouraging him to act like a five-year-old progress."

"But if we can get him solidly into the Harrison personality—"

"No. He's been in your care over a year, and now I've missed my son's first two Christmases. I'm through with play-acting. We've spent a fortune bringing him here, and he's not one bit better." She stood. "Just make the arrangements to discharge him. We're going home tomorrow."

"I can't allow that, Mis'ess Prescott."

"I said we were leaving."

"Take some time to think this over. We've come too far for you to throw everything away."

She walked to the door, paused a minute then knocked before she spun around.

"Okay, I've thought about it, and I haven't changed my mind. We will be leaving. Now you do as I ask, or I'll call Admiral Smith. You remember him, don't you? President Truman's poker buddy?"

"You're making a mistake."

The door opened. "No. I'm rectifying a mistake. I never should have come here and left my baby."



John Harris closed the barn door with one hand, steadying his Stetson with the other against the winter wind. The northerner stalled a week ago and covered the Texas hills like scum on a pond.

Temperatures below freezing persisted and forced him to spend more time indoors than he liked. At the back porch, he stomped off the mud and removed his boots.

The sight of his sweet wife cooking lunch warmed him as much as the stove's heat. In the thirty-two years he and Miranda had been married, what started as respect and physical desire had matured into a deep abiding love.

Her tireless service to everyone her life touched endeared her all the more.

David crawled into the kitchen pushing a wooden car John had carved from a cedar branch for Christmas. He looked up with a smile that lit his whole face. John couldn't have loved the boy more if he had been his own. He always wanted a son.

"Pa." The baby beamed ear to ear as he steadied himself and stood then raced into John's outstretched arms.

"You been a good boy?"

"Dood boe-eeee," he repeated.

John tossed him onto his shoulder and carried him to the sitting room. Amidst the scattered toys littering the floor, he sat down with his grandson.

"Get the tractor fixed, honey?" Miranda called from the kitchen.

"Yeah."

She appeared in the doorway with a forlorn expression. "Sandy called this morning."

"Oh?" John didn't like the look. "Calling from Vienna must have cost her a pretty penny."

"She's bringing Harry home. Wants us to have David in Dallas next week." Miranda wiped her hands with her apron. "Or she said she'd send the nanny she's hired if we can't make it."

"Is she putting him back in that mental hospital?"

"No. She's arranging around the clock nurses and attendants. Thinks he'll be better off at home."

He glanced at the boy. "We'll take him. Won't hurt to put planting off another week."

Miranda nodded then turned away. Her eyes expressed John's heart, but the boy was Sandra's, not theirs, no matter how much they might wish it otherwise.



Sandy checked and rechecked the nursery. Her insides churned with anticipation. Too many days, weeks, and months of separation accentuated the longing in her heart for her son.

"Where could they be? I can't imagine what's taking them so long."

The nanny smiled. "Don't you worry, Mis'ess Prescott. Everything's ready. You just try and relax."

"You're right." She tried to believe it though her heart told her if something could go wrong, it would.

Everything had to be perfect. She had waited so long for this day,

much too long. Her baby was finally coming home after so much preparation.

"Why don't you wait downstairs? Maybe on the porch. The ducks were out on the back lawn earlier." The nanny guided her to the door. "It'll all be fine. You'll see."

The woman she hired to care for her son, fiftyish and heavy-set, bore pleasant enough features, but lacked a softness. The agency claimed Mis'ess Fenimore the best available. Sandy only hoped her confidence remained after David arrived.

"I should do something, I guess. Might help take my mind off the time. Maybe I'll go check on Harry if you're sure there's nothing more we need here."

"Yes, ma'am."

She started out then gasped and turned back. "Did you ever find the little snowsuit I bought? It's so bitterly cold. I can't believe this front won't blow away. I've got to make sure David will be warm enough."

"Hanging in the closet, Mis'ess Prescott. Now don't you be worrying."

Sandy chewed her thumbnail. "I shouldn't, I know. It's just that—Maybe I'll go see about Harry."

"That's a good idea. Check on your husband, ma'am. That's sure to help time pass a little faster."

His new quarters were down the south hall, two adjoining guest rooms that shared a bath. With new door locks and bars installed on the windows overlooking the rambling creek below, the suite made a comfortable if not perfect prison.

She knocked twice, waited a second, then knocked twice more. Shortly a key slid into the lock from the inside, and the door opened.

"Afternoon, Anthony. How is he?"

The attendant shrugged. "Pretty good. He's playing."

A quick survey reassured her, everything seemed in order. Harry sat on the floor building a fort with Lincoln Logs. "David and his grandparents should be arriving any minute. If . . ." She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples again.

"Don't fret, Miz P. I can handle Harry. Don't you worry none at all."

She offered a weak smile. The man was a giant, well over six foot four she guessed, but that was only one of the reasons she hired him. That and the fact his skin was black. Harry should never mistake him for Buddy.

"Thanks, Anthony. I have no doubts in your ability. It's just that—Oh, well. Buzz me if he gets agitated."

"Will do, ma'am."

She watched Harry stack the notched logs for a minute. Satisfied he was having a good day, she retreated downstairs to wait.

A horn honked out in the drive. Instant tears blurred her vision. "He's here." She flew down the stairs and out the front door. All Sandy could see of her mother was her backside as she bent over into the rear seat.

Her father unfolded himself from the old Ford. "The boy fell asleep. I think you're mother's changing him."

Arriving just as Mama straightened with the baby in her arms, Sandy's heart almost burst. Oh, David! She stopped short and pressed a hand against her quivering lips. He'd grown so much.

Had it been so long? The spitting image of his daddy, her son was the most beautiful child she had ever seen. She held out her arms. "David, my precious, come to Mama."

Turning away from her, he nestled into his grandmother's shoulder. A stranger to her own baby. A knife stabbed her heart.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. He'll warm up in no time. He's always such a happy boy." Her mama turned to the baby. "But you just woke up, didn't you, little man?" She pulled a blanket up over him.

"He doesn't know me."

"Come on. Let's get him inside before he catches his death in this wind. It's a lot colder here than back home." Her mother started toward the house, and her father fell in behind her, but none of Sandy's muscles would respond. She couldn't move.

A knot in her chest grew and rose to her throat. She swallowed hard, repressing the sob. Oh God, what had she done? Her baby didn't even know her.

With fear and doubt raging, she hugged herself against a cold blast then turned and went in to make some introductions.



Upstairs, Harrison pretended to ignore the huge black man his mother said would help take care of him. He didn't like the man because he didn't need a babysitter. Her with her swishing skirts. He was a big boy.

Next year he would go to school. Another layer of logs went up on the wall of the fort, but it didn't look just right. It tilted and angered him. With one swing, he scattered the logs across the room.

"My, my, would you jes look at this here mess you made. What's wrong with you, Harrison?"

"Nothing."

The colored man squatted, gathering the logs. "You want to start

over?"

"No."

Anthony's thick dark lips spread into a broad smile. In brilliant contrast, his teeth gleamed. "You hungry?" He dropped a couple of the logs into their storage tube. "Wanna help Anthony pick these up?"

"No. I want you to go away. I don't need a dumb babysitter, and I don't have to mind you." He hated being treated like that. "And if you hurt me, I'll tell my mother."

The man patted his arm. "Calm down now. No reason to get upset."

The anger boiled into rage. Harrison took a deep breath. Suddenly, everything became crystal clear. He was a grown man. Harry lunged at the giant, energy pulsing through his limbs.

His fingers found the enemy's throat, and squeezed. Black fingers pried at his, but he was determined to kill. One hand was pulled away, then the other. Anthony pushed him back.

"I said calm down. Don't make me hurt you."

"I don't know who you are or how I got here, but I'll not be held prisoner. If you don't open that door, you'll be sorry." Harry scrambled to his feet, circling the man, threatening.

Anthony backed toward the door keeping a constant eye on him. "Come on. Calm down. There's no reason to get so upset," he said as he pushed a button beside the door. A buzzer sounded in the distance.

"Calling your boss, huh? Who is he anyway? Well, never mind. I'll get you both." Harry continued circling, searching for an opening. Footsteps came running down the hall. "Ha. It's that worthless Nightingale, isn't it? He's responsible for this. I should have known."

The door opened. Horror etched Sandy's face. Her father stood behind her. That sorry preacher must be behind them. Just like that snake to hide behind an old man and a woman's skirt.

Harry feigned at the giant then dashed toward them. "I'll kill you, Nightingale." The door slammed shut. Before he knew it, a ton of black flesh pinned him to the floor.

"I've got him." He pulled Harry's hands behind his back and wrapped something around them.

The babysitter took his job pretty literally. "Get off me, you brute."

The black man knocked twice on the door. "Quick, get me a shot."

Harry struggled. Nightingale was in the house. If only he could get him, stop the nightmare, break his spell over Sandy. A needle pricked his arm. He mustered his strength, pushing against his captor. He had to kill him and stop the madness.

Everything slowed. His vision blurred. He tried to focus.

"Oh, Harry. Sweetheart, please."

Her words trailed off as darkness engulfed him, but he could smell her sweetness. His poor Sandra. That wolf Nightingale had her, but . . . so tired. Can't open—



John shook his head. The attendant carried Harry as easily as a mother might carry her toddler. His son-in-law looked so haggard in the giant's arms.

Mental illness had taken its physical toll. He curled peacefully on the single bed, and Anthony pulled the cover over his shoulders.

Without a word, he and Sandy joined Miranda and David downstairs.

Logs blazed in the stone fireplace, but a chill had latched hold on his gut. He didn't care whose child David was, his grandson would not be staying in a house with that madman.

He glanced around the room. He'd seen it all before, the trappings of wealth. The fancy furniture and expensive paintings didn't impress him. Like Solomon said, it was all vanity. He dragged a chair close to the fire and rolled a smoke.

"He get like that much?"

Sitting with David in her lap, Sandy glanced up the stairs then studied her hands a moment. They trembled. "Not often."

"What'd that high-falutin' doctor say 'fore you left?" John pulled hard on his cigarette.

She lit one of her own, shrugged, then sighed, sending a puff of smoke toward the baby's face. David closed his eyes and shied away.

"Oh, Sandy." Her mother fanned the air.

"Mama's sorry, David." Sandy helped her fan. "That Harry has multiple personality disorder. He also diagnosed him as a paranoid schizophrenic with a mother fixation."

Though she inhaled another lungful of smoke, she was careful to blow it away from the baby.

"All what's-his-name at Timberlawn could come up with was a nervous breakdown. Nobody has any answers. No cures. I hoped bringing him home would help. I guess nothing will."

"Sandra." John tossed his half-smoked butt into the fire. "Listen to me now. Your mama and me can stay a couple of days, but when we leave, we're taking David with us."

His daughter straightened the baby's curls. A profound sadness filmed her eyes. "No, Papa. I'll put Harry back in Timberlawn for good if that's what I have to do, but I can't live another day without my son."

Chapter Fifty



T

he drug released it grip.

Harry, in the nether between sleep and awake, rolled over and buried his head into the oversized feather pillow. Nothing mattered. A sweet dream beckoned, and he slipped toward it, but a jangle tingled his ears.

Calliope? He rolled over, sat up, and blinked. The gypsy stood near the window, haloed in the silvery moonlight. The fragrance of her reminded him of honeysuckle and filled his room.

“Is it you? Aren’t you dead?”

She floated toward him, bangle bracelets tinkling. “Of course I am, my dear boy.” The ghost sat on his bed. “Remember when you were a child, and Calliope gave you a charm?”

He threw back the covers. “Sure I do. It’s still in the attic with all my other stuff.”

She stroked his cheek. “You’ve been sick, Harrison. Wear the charm next to your heart. It will make you well again.”

Harry laughed. “But I’m not sick.”

“No, huh? My silly boy. What about Nightingale?”

The name stung him. “Where is the weasel?”

She floated toward the closet. “Wear the charm, Harry, and the preacher will be yours.”

The muscles in his neck and back knotted, and his pulse pounded in his ears. If only he could get his fingers around Nightingale’s throat, his problems would be over. Sandy would be safe forever. “Tell me where he is.”

“Wear the charm like ol’ Calliope says, and you’ll know what to

do.” She smiled then disappeared through the closet wall.

He stared until it struck him that the closet had a trap door. He ran and pulled it open. Within minutes all the hanging clothes were scattered on the floor and the two shelves removed.

Pulling a chair into the closet, he climbed onto it and pushed against the false ceiling. The panel gave way. He was free.

The heavy dust stank as Harry hoisted himself up into the musty attic, but what an adventure. He’d always loved playing in what he thought of as his secret domain. His mother never came up.

No one did, but Calliope. In the musty darkness, he felt his way along until he found the light string.

The naked bulb glared and chased the darkness to the far corners, through draped furniture, stacks of boxes, and dust-covered heirlooms cast eerie shadows on the slanted walls. Spider webs blocked his path.

Swatting them aside, he stepped around the corner then ducked under the eave.

After all the years lost, he was back in his old fortress. He walked to his old toy box and lifted the lid. Handmade wooden toys filled the top tray; a propeller plane, a milk delivery truck.

Where had he put that medal? Calliope had given it to him when he was what, five? He closed the lid and let his thoughts wander back to his childhood.

For some strange reason, it all seemed so fresh. He wore that gypsy’s necklace with the gold icon for a full year, and sure enough, it stopped his bedwetting. Glancing around his niche, he racked his brain.

“Where is it?” he whispered.

His eyes settled on a leather box sitting in the middle of his mother’s old vanity. That’s where it was, he remembered now. Harry eased toward the dressing table.

After his mother sent the piece to the attic, Calliope had helped him lug it from the far corner then made a big deal out of retiring his good luck charm. Afraid to give it up, he resisted, but she shamed him into it.

Swiping the cracked leather, he sent a shower of dancing particles into the air. With stilled breath, he popped the lid open. His hand froze just over the medallion. Could this really rid him of Nightingale?

His stomach soured at the mere thought of the preacher’s name.

Had he really been sick?

Sure he had.

Sick of his wife carrying another man’s child. Sick of loving a woman that didn’t love him back. He wrapped his fingers around the icon. It felt good. He picked it up and held it out.

The leather lacing dropped. Oh man, it felt real good. He kissed it,

then flung the string over his head and tucked the medallion under his shirt.

Odd. The cold metal burned, but he stiffened his back, not about to take it off. He would wear the gypsy's good luck charm just in case.

Over the years, his mother's longtime companion had offered more than one strange solution to their family problems, and Harry had seen them work before. The metal warmed, spreading a reverberating tingle through his soul.

Memories of the last year raced by his mind's eye. Vivid images twisted and intermingled until melding into a soupy fog. The realization he'd lost a whole year buckled his knees. He sank to the floor.

Twelve months gone. He forced himself to remember. Like it was yesterday, he saw himself shooting the wall over Sandy's head. Curse you, Buddy Nightingale. I should have been shooting you, not my wife.

Anger rumbled in his gut and burned his chest. He grabbed hold of the icon. The fire in his heart balled up, but instead of exploding to rage, it cooled and hardened to vengeance.

Everything would be fine once he exterminated that wife-stealing no-good. Maybe he had been sick, but now he was better. Soon, very soon, he'd spill Nightingale's blood, then he would be whole.

Harry stood. Where was the preacher? Sandy would know, but she couldn't have a part in this. She could never know who killed him, but dead he would be.

He focused on the objective as though another military maneuver. Identify all obstacles then eliminate them. Nothing to it. My swan, he'd worked out the logistics for Omaha Beach; he could do anything.

"You don't stand a chance, Buddy Boy." Deep into the night, Harry studied different routes he could take, but every path dovetailed to one place, Pine Bluff. Last he heard, the senior Nightingale still lived there.

Time to leave. He pulled off his shoes and headed for the back stairs. Careful to skip the noisy third tread, he made his way to the ground floor.

His fingers ran along the walls tracing his way through the dark house to the kitchen then out the side door. He glanced around. The house slept. Slipping his shoes back on, he trotted toward the garage.

The side door knob wouldn't turn. Harry ran his fingers over the sill. No key. Frustration threatened to propel him into that place where he couldn't think straight. He grabbed hold of his good luck charm, and a chill coursed through him.

Filling his lungs, he studied his situation a minute. Of course! The window. He ran to the far side of the garage. Ha. Just like he

remembered. He pushed up on the frame, but it gave only a quarter of an inch.

He eased to the front and checked the house. No lights on.

At the window again, he pulled off his right shoe, and tapped the heel against the glass. It held. He reared back and swung. The glass broke with too loud a crash. He hurried back to his lookout spot.

While he waited, he counted, a habit he'd picked up in the Navy. At three hundred, he decided no one had heard. Back at the window, he picked the larger shards out, reached in and unlocked it, then climbed through.

The Silver Streak was just like he left it. How long ago? Was it really over a year since he drove her? He didn't want to believe it, but knew it was true.

Under the right rear fender, his fingers searched for the magnetic box that held a spare set of keys. The first pass rendered nothing but sheet metal. He knelt and stuck his hand higher into the tire well.

Pay dirt. The box held a second then sprang loose.

The top slid back, and the keys dropped into his hand. He unlocked the driver's door and got behind the wheel. The stale air gave way to a homey aroma of supple leather and oiled wood. He'd loved this car from the day his mother brought it home.

Now it would be his chariot of war, his vehicle to wholeness. He slipped the key into its slot and turned.

The sixteen cylinders sprang to life. He breathed then laughed aloud. Of course it started, the Rolls always started. He jumped out and lifted the garage door.

The house still slept.

After backing into the driveway, he coasted the distance of the driveway on idle.

Mentally, he rechecked his list. Bank first, then a gun, and of course, some decent clothes. After all, had to look the part. A quarter of a mile down the road, Harry rolled down the window and screamed into the night.

"Prepare to meet your maker, Nightingale."



That same morning, a hundred miles south, Jac Carpenter awoke. He would wonder for the rest of his life if destiny or chance chose that day to bring him back, but that fateful morning, his thoughts didn't congeal well.

The hospital ward wasn't what he expected. One minute he'd been charging up Pork Chop Hill, the next, he came to in this place.

For the longest time, he lay in his bed searching his memories. A little after the sun peeked over the horizon, an orderly walked in and headed straight for Jac. The man pulled him up and lifted his legs off the bed's side.

Without a word he pulled off Jac's PJs and slipped Khaki pants and shirt on him. A part of him wanted to ask questions, but he couldn't seem to make his tongue work.

The man finished. "Come on, John. Let's get you something to eat." Why would he call him John? No one called him that. His grandpa hung his initials on him before Jac could even walk.

John Austin Carpenter let the orderly guide him out of the ward.

Forty-five minutes later, he found himself sitting outside on a bench in front of his building. He still hadn't said a word or figured out where he was.

Before him, fifteen or twenty more red brick, two-story buildings scattered the well-manicured grounds. A narrow blacktopped lane wound through the property dotted here and there by a few ancient oaks.

Maybe a dozen or so men were out and about. Some just sat and stared. One even had a stream of drool hanging from the corner of his mouth. The rest milled about in small groups. Slowly, Jac's lethargy faded.

Why had they put him here? What had happened? He remembered the sergeant hollering the order to move out, but what happened next hung over the edge of his mind.

A hand tapped his shoulder. "Hey, Buddy, got a cigarette?"

He turned toward the voice. The vertebra in his neck popped. Warmth radiated from the muscles that had been inactive too long. He rocked his head from side to side.

That initial burst of pure pleasure of movement melted into a sense of well-being. He stood and faced the man asking for a smoke. "No, I don't think I do."

The poor fella's hands and arms jerked so bad Jac wondered how he could get a butt to his lips. "Well, boogers, boy, I don't either. I hate this place. They don't give you enough of anything."

"Where are we?"

"Man, are you crazy? This here is the nut house." He pulled his shaking thumb over his shoulder. "Don't you know nothing?"

"The last thing I remember is charging up Pork Chop—" the word hill froze on his lips. That's what Nightingale said in Dallas. The preacher man put that hill on me. Jac hated him.

The self-righteous creep didn't deserve to live. Sticking his nose into other people's business and spouting his devil words. How dare he call him a murderer.

The cigarette man poked Jac. "Hey, Buddy, forget it. That's what you have to do." The man backed away. "It's not worth it, you know."

"What are you talking about?"

The poor man shook all over. His eyes opened wide, and he pointed a shaking finger. "You, man. You've got to forget Korea. It's not worth being crazy."

The guy was right, but he didn't know what Jac needed. How could he? He didn't know Buddy Nightingale. He had never been called a murderer.

"So where are we?"

"I already told you. In the nut house."

"No. What country, what state, what city?"

"Oh, sorry, man. We're in Waco, Texas, at the VA nut house."

"Well, I'll be." Jac looked down the road. Hmmm, not so far from home. "So how do I get out of here?"

"You can leave anytime. Ain't no guards or anything." The man jerked his hand to the east. "Downtown's that way."

"Thanks, old timer."

"Don't go, man. It's bad out there. Ain't nobody gonna give you nothing, not that they give you enough of anything here."

Jac turned his face toward Waco and walked. If memory served, the highway ran right through town, and Hico was less than seventy miles away.

Home.

It'd be nice to see the old place again, but not as nice as paying back Nightingale for cursing him with Pork Chop Hill. The thought warmed his heart as he walked away.

Chapter Fifty-one



andy opened the door to the attic.

“Harrison, are you up there? Come on down.” She listened in the stillness then climbed to the third step. “Come on, Harry. Breakfast is getting cold.” She waited again.

Searching through the cobwebs and heaven-only-knew-what-else didn’t seem like the best way to start her day. “Bee bee bumble bee, whoever’s out, come in free. Hey, I give up. Come on down, and let’s eat.”

The sound of heavy boots running pulled Sandy around. Someone was in a hurry.

“Miz P, he’s taken the car.” The panic in Anthony’s tone unsettled her. She climbed down and ran to the door just as the big man rounded the corner. He stopped mid-stride, eyes pleading forgiveness.

“I’m sorry, ma’am.” He drew several deep breaths. “Harry’s gone.”

“Oh, no. Are you sure?”

“Yes, ma’am. He broke the window glass to get in the garage, and the Lord knows he’s not in his right mind. Please forgive me, ma’am.”

“This isn’t your fault. You can’t watch him twenty-four/seven.”

His wide eyes glanced upward. “Dear God, don’t let him hurt someone, please.” He looked back to her. “Miz P, you best call the law.”

What should she do? She hated herself for letting it come to that. “Yes, I guess you’re right.”

Frantically trying to rehearse what she’d say, she trudged downstairs to make the call, but . . . where to start? How could she explain her husband to a total stranger? She found her father in the

kitchen, bouncing David on his knee.

“Papa?”

He looked up. “Mornin’, Sandy. How’s Harry?”

Tears filled her eyes, but she struggled to keep her voice from betraying her fear. “I don’t know. He escaped last night.”

“He what? Where is he? Is he hurt?”

“I don’t know, Papa.” She wiped her cheeks. “He broke into the garage and left in the Rolls. I’ve got to call the police.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “The police? What for? He hasn’t broken any laws.”

“But . . . his one thought this last year—his obsession—is to kill Buddy. I don’t know how he stayed sane long enough to leave without someone hearing him. He’s a smart man, and if he’s thinking even halfway straight, hunting Buddy down will be easy enough.”

“So you’re planning on bringing strangers into family business?”

She pulled away and stared at her father. “You’d like it if Harry killed Buddy, wouldn’t you?”

“No.” He matched her stare for a minute then shook his head.

“No. Sometimes I used to wish I’d finished what I started, but . . .” He kissed the baby’s cheek. “That was before our little David came along.”

“You’ve . . . you’ve . . .?”

“He looks too much like his daddy for me to keep hating Buddy. No. I don’t hate him. Not like I used to.”

His declaration startled and relieved her. She assumed her mother told him the whole story, but this was the first time anything had been said aloud about the baby’s true father in front of her.

Of course, anybody who hadn’t figured it out either hadn’t met Buddy or was blind. She wished it would be as easy to find her husband before he wreaked any havoc.

“So if I don’t call the police, what am I going to do?”

“Call Buddy and warn him.”

A lump formed in her throat, and her heart beat thunderously. Somehow, she nodded. That’s what she’d wanted from the moment she knew Harry was gone, but now Papa said it.

Since he had the idea, she could call and not feel guilty. Oh, how long she had wanted to call him. How many times had she picked up the receiver? He didn’t even know about David.

What would she say?

She kissed her father’s cheek. “Watch the baby while I call?” Her voice quivered. She cleared her throat and slipped into Harry’s office, closing the door behind her. She didn’t want anyone to know she had Buddy’s number memorized.

A whole afternoon spent calling long distance information would

be worth it after all. Her fingers trembled as she dialed the operator. A woman came on and Sandy repeated the number.

"That's right, Dalton, Georgia."

A fraction of a second after the phone rang in the old Baxter place, Sandy heard the electronic equivalent on her end.



From the porch, Buddy heard the telephone, but didn't bother to get up. Neither did Abigail. Mandy was in the house, and no one got as many calls as his nine-year-old daughter.

"Hello, Nightingale's residence. How may I help you?" A pause. "Yes, ma'am, and may I say who's calling?"

"Dad, phone's for you. It's a lady named Sandra Prescott."

Sitting forward, he tried to steady his coffee cup in his shaking hand. Sandy? Oh Lord, let there be another Sandra Prescott. He forced himself to stand. Abigail grabbed his forearm.

"What's the matter, Buddy?" Knowing he had to look guilty, he met her eyes anyway. In them, concern faded as a spark of recognition grew bright. "Ah . . . Sandy Harris Prescott?"

"I think so."

Mandy pushed open the screen door. "Daddy. Did you hear me? The phone's for you."

"I heard you, baby." He patted Abigail's hand. "Do you want to talk to her?"

"No, but I don't want you to either."

"Fair enough, why don't we both get it?"

Abigail leaned forward in her rocking chair. "How are we going to do that?"

"I'll hold the phone out so you can hear, and if you want to say anything, be my guest." He stood and pulled her to her feet.

With his arm wrapped around her waist, Buddy walked to the phone. His thoughts swirled, more in curiosity than desire. He would always love Sandy, but the old passion had greatly cooled after he confessed his sins to his wife.

He picked up the phone then held it out like he'd promised. Abigail put her ear next to the receiver while Amanda watched the odd arrangement with obvious wonderment. "This is Buddy Nightingale."

"Buddy, it's Sandy." Her voice shook. "I'm sorry to call, but I'm afraid I've got some bad news." She sounded fearful.

He didn't respond, deciding to give her as much time as she needed.

“It’s my husband, Harry. He’s . . . well, he’s escaped.”

What could this have to do with him? “Escaped? From where?”

“Oh, just the house, but well, it’s a long story. He’s been in mental hospitals most of the last year, but they weren’t helping. I’ve been trying to keep him at home, and now he’s escaped.”

“Sandy, I don’t understand. What does this have to do with me?”

“Well, it’s just that I think you may be in danger. I don’t know how to say this except to say it. Buddy, he wants to kill you.”

Abigail gasped. “Kill him? Why would your husband want to kill mine?”

There was a long silence.

“All Harry’s trouble started a little over a year ago. I was pregnant.”

An internal drummer stepped up the beat of Buddy’s heart. Frantically, he calculated in his mind. Could it be?

“I guess he blamed Buddy. He’s always been so jealous of him, and . . . and he just went crazy. All he’s talked about the last year is killing Buddy, and now he’s escaped.”

Her voice was stronger now, and she raised it a little.

“Do you understand what I’m saying? I’m trying to warn you. That’s why I called.”

Could his wife hear the pounding in his chest? He couldn’t speak.

“Why?” She asked Sandy, staring at him with soul-sick eyes. “Why would he blame Buddy?”

Another long silence ensued as the obvious truth settled like a thundercloud on a mountain top. Lightning flashed.

“I was pregnant—” Her voice broke. “—with . . . with Buddy’s baby.” Sandy broke into sobs, and a tear fell from Abigail’s eye.

No one said anything.

Those last words, spoken with the softness of an April shower shamed still by the sun, boomed with torrents of slashing barbs through his heart until the whole of his being was flooded.

‘Pregnant with Buddy’s baby!’

“Sandy, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to, so many times. But after the way you left, and then dealing with Harry . . . it’s been a horrendously tough year. I suppose I convinced myself you didn’t want to know. But this morning . . . I no longer had a choice.”

“I see.”

“It was even Papa’s idea. He said I should call. He said he doesn’t hate you anymore, Buddy. I didn’t intend to tell you like this, not under such awful circumstances, but . . .”

Abigail found her voice, but spoke barely above a whisper. “And the baby? Did you have it?”

“Yes, on December seventh, a boy. I named him David.”

Buddy pulled Abby closer to him and held her tight. “So I have a son?”

“Yes. He’s a beautiful baby, and so good.” She paused. “Buddy?”

“What?”

“You might not remember, but you and Harry have met.”

“Oh yeah? When?”

“His mother was real sick and went to your father for a miracle. Harry said he met you that first day they came out to Pine Bluff looking for Reverend Nightingale. There would have been an old gypsy with him named Calliope.”

“Did they drive a Rolls Royce?”

“Yes. That’s Harry’s car now, the one he escaped in.”

“Does he know where we live?” Abigail asked.

“I don’t think so, but he’s smart. I thought he might head for Pine Bluff since he knows your father’s there.”

“Mercy, you don’t think he might hurt the old man, do you?”

“I don’t know, Buddy. He’s liable to do just about anything. He’s not in his right mind. The doctors said he’s schizophrenic . . . with more labels just as bad.”

“I’ve got to get off this phone and warn Dad. Thanks for calling, Sandy. I really appreciate it. We’ll talk soon about David. Okay?”

“Sure, Buddy. Please be careful.”

As he replaced the receiver on its cradle, he turned his wife toward him and hugged her. “I better call Dad.”

His wife cuddled to his chest. “Buddy, does this change anything?”

He lifted her face and kissed her. “Until death do us part. Remember?”

After seven rings, the operator announced there was no answer at the Pine Bluff parsonage. “Okay, give me a second.” Buddy flipped through his address book until he found the J’s.

“Try this one.” He read off Elder Jones’ home number. While the operator dialed the new number, a worry formed in Buddy’s gut. With each unanswered ring, the knot grew.

A female voice finally answered. “Hello?”

“Ma’am, this is Buddy Nightingale. Is my father there?”

“No,” she said. “He’s over Llano way.”

“Do you know where exactly?”

“Well, now, I’m not sure. Let me ask.” She laid the phone down. He could hear conversation in the background, but not what was being said.

“Hello there, Buddy. This is Elder Jones. Your daddy’s helping Travis Buckmeyer with a revival all this week. You remember Travis,

don't ya? He married Emma Lee Harris."

Of course he remembered the man who should have been his brother-in-law. Oh Lord, why was I so stupid back then? "Yeah, I remember Travis. You got his phone number?"

"Sorry. They don't have a phone, but I could get a message to your dad. I'm planning on driving over in a day or two. Probably Thursday, but I guess I could go on tomorrow if you need me to."

Buddy glanced at Abigail. "No. I think I better go myself. I can be there by . . ." She mouthed 'morning.' "First thing tomorrow morning."

"Anything I should know about?"

"Not really, but if you can keep an eye out for a fella driving a Rolls Royce, I'd appreciate it."

Jones laughed. "Man, I haven't seen one of those since that rich lady and her gypsy maid came hunting a miracle back in '40."

"Same car. It's a long story, but the woman's son might be trouble."

"Should I call Ike? He's sheriff now."

Buddy didn't recall an Ike and didn't want the law involved. According to Sandy, Harry hadn't done anything. Yet. "No, just be on the lookout for the car. How do I get to Travis' place?"

While Jones gave Buddy detailed directions, Abigail disappeared. Once he finished, he went looking for his wife and found her carefully arranging socks and underwear in the leather suitcase. He turned her around.

"Don't pack too much. Once I find Dad, I'm coming straight back."

She put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "Mandy and I are going with you."

He leaned back, but still held her arms. The set of her mouth coupled with the fear in her eyes quenched any misgivings. She wasn't letting him go anywhere without her, and he had no intentions of arguing.

Though not about to do anything stupid with Sandy, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he couldn't convince Abigail to stay in a month of Sundays. He kissed her cheek.

"Why not? This is probably a lot to do over nothing, but we'll make it a holiday." He hugged her. "I love you, sweetheart."

She grinned. "I know you do."

Chapter Fifty-two



Jac sat lightly on the bench seat.

He hated hitch-hiking, but it beat walking all the way home. A *Waco Tribune* rescued from a trash bin covered his lap. It didn't seem possible that a whole year had passed since Korea.

Thankfully, the driver hadn't talked much after the initial flurry of 'where to' and the like, and with no recollection of the recent past, Jac wasn't about to start a conversation.

The truck slowed. He looked up as they neared the crossroads that served as downtown Glenrose. The rancher stretched his back. "Where you want me to drop you off, partner?"

"At the light'll be fine. Maybe I can catch a ride from there."

The truck tires eased off the blacktop just before the signal light. "You hungry?" the driver asked as he put the transmission in neutral.

"Guess I'll have to wait till I get home."

The man pulled a small wad of folded bills from his shirt pocket and peeled off a greenback. "Here." He pointed over Jac's shoulder. "The diner has pretty decent food. Have lunch on me."

Hating charity, he hesitated. But it wasn't like he asked.

"Thanks, mister." He grabbed the dollar, stuck it in his khakis, then headed for the diner. He'd eaten in the place a time or two with the colonel; always liked sitting next to the window that faced the intersection so he could watch the traffic.

Almost as soon as seated, a Rolls Royce parked in the lot caught his eye. While he scarfed down chicken-fried steak smothered with cream gravy, he studied its classic lines.

The more he eyed the Silver Streak the more familiar it seemed.

He finished his seventy-five cent meal and paid his bill.

Once outside, he headed straight for a better look at the car. On his second time around, hard soles crushing gravel pulled his attention away.

A neatly dressed man strolled toward him. Jac recognized the swagger of a gentleman who owns the finest automobile in the world.

“Nice car.” He backed away a step.

“Sure is.” The stranger stopped at the driver’s door. “You ever seen a Rolls before?”

“A couple of times when I was a kid. Funny, I’d swear this was the same car or at least one just like it.”

“That so?”

“Yes, sir. Back in ’40 or ’41. It came through Hico pretty regular. All us kids would watch for it. Getting to see it was the living end.”

The man thought for a moment. “That’s when my mother was ill. We went back and forth quite a few times during that period.”

“Where you headed now, Mister—?”

“Prescott, Harry Prescott.” The man stepped toward him and extended his hand. “I’m headed to Pine Bluff.”

With a firm grip, Jac shook. “That’s on the other side of Marble Falls, isn’t it?”

“That would be correct.”

“Care to give a veteran a ride? You got to go right through Hico. I could jump out at the light. Wouldn’t cost you hardly more than a minute.”



Harry eyeballed the stranger. Maybe a little company would be nice. He needed to get his mind off Nightingale for a while, give his plan time to ferment.

“Korea?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get in, soldier. I’ll take you home.”

The hitchhiker slid into the passenger seat. It pleased Harry the way his rider went on about the Silver Streak. He loved the look of admiration in the man’s eyes. “So what’s your name?” Harry asked as he backed the Rolls out.

“Jac Carpenter.”

“Well, hang on, Jac. This baby thinks she’s an airplane.” When the Hico city limits sign came into view, Harry let off the gas. “Where do I turn?”

He pointed ahead. “You can just let me off at the light up there. The house isn’t far from the square.”

"I'm not in such a hurry I can't go a few blocks out of my way."

The younger man turned sideways in his seat. "Okay, I'd appreciate it. Turn right on the first street after the light."

Harry followed the directions until the young man pointed out a modest house in need of repair, but overall, better than he expected. Jac grabbed the door handle then faced him.

"I've been turning it over in my mind, Mister Prescott, and I can't get out before I ask. Do you happen to know if the Nightingales still have that church in Pine Bluff?"

"Why?" He folded his arms across his chest. "They friends of yours?"

"I would not call them friends." The soldier laughed. "The last time I saw old man Nightingale, he was preaching my father's funeral. I hate the self-righteous hypocrite."

"How do you feel about his son?"

"You know Broderick Eversole Nightingale?"

"Yeah, I know Buddy." Harry balled his fist. "I'd like to—" He stopped himself. What was he doing? He shouldn't be telling this soldier anything. "Well, never mind what I'd like."

"Well, I'd like him six foot under."

"Guess it's a small world after all, but I better be going. Good to meet you, Jac." Harry extended his hand.

The young man of like mind grabbed it but squeezed instead of shaking. "That what you were going to say?"

With his free hand, Harry rubbed his chest, letting his fingers linger over the hard outline of the gypsy's medallion. "You don't look like a fortune teller."

The boyish face hardened. "It's in your eyes, sir. Same thing's gnawing me. I'm betting you want Buddy Nightingale deader than a nail bad as I do. Feel it in my bones."

Harry studied the soldier, suddenly aware the medallion tingled his chest. Had the gods brought the fellow his way? "And why would you want to kill Nightingale?"

"That no-good cursed me with Pork Chop Hill. Nobody should do something like that and enjoy a long life."

Harry racked his memories. Pork Chop Hill. Though the words had no meaning for him, they quickened the loss of the last year. No-good Nightingale not only stole his wife, but a year of his life.

"I don't know about your hill."

"Number 731, Korea, better known as Pork Chop. What a blood bath." Jac wiped his hand over his mouth. "Shoot, I wasn't even supposed to go. Our unit was headed for Germany, then two weeks before we were to ship out . . ."

"What?"

“Oh, I let this gal I was sparking talk me into going to see the great Eli Everman and his hotshot singer everyone was raving about.” He paused, his cheeks flushed red and his eyes brimmed with tears.

“Nightingale called me out. Right in front of all those folks. Cursed me with Pork Chop Hill. Then he had the gall to say I killed the Colonel, uh, my father.” He paused again and swiped at his eye.

“He’s evil, Mister Prescott. Worse kind.” Jac leaned forward and spoke with a growl. “Runs around acting like he’s some kind of holy man, then curses people, lies about them.”

The boy knew what he was talking about. His eyes were slits. “I’m telling you true, the man is evil and has no right to live.”

“How come you went to Korea if you weren’t supposed to?”

The question pushed the soldier back. “Don’t know. Got as far as my captain, asking that exact question, but nobody knew why I had been singled out. Didn’t make no difference. Away I went.”

Parking the Rolls, Harry contemplated then got out. He walked a little ways up the street.

The balmy breeze and warm afternoon sun made it a perfect spring day. Looking through a green puzzle of baby leaves budding everywhere above him, he shook his head very slightly and chuckled to himself.

The gods had smiled on him.

He slipped his hand inside his shirt and grasped his talisman. Calliope was right. The preacher was his. He walked back to the front of the Rolls where Carpenter stood next to the passenger door.

After staring at the younger man a good sixty seconds, Harry discerned no deceit. Jac didn’t flinch, and from the cut of his jaw to the steel in his eyes, Carpenter looked exactly like the kind of man Harry could count on.

“I think fate’s thrown us together, Jac.”

“So do I, sir. What do we do first?”



Sandy leaned forward and pointed ahead over the seat at her father’s car. “See where he’s turning, Anthony?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The tufted leather swallowed her frame as her head fell all the way back to the headrest. At first, she didn’t want to leave Dallas, but what else could she do? Papa must be right, thinking Harry was coming south to find Buddy.

And Mis’ess Fenimore promised to stay in case a call came in. Before Sandy left, she gave her every phone number she could think of

in Cypress Springs.

David stirred, and she picked him up. "We're almost home, sweetheart." The baby laid his head against her shoulder. The word home warmed Sandy's insides. She'd been a fool to ever leave.

Up ahead, Mister John turned again, and she leaned toward Anthony.

"I see him, Miz P." He glanced in the rearview mirror with a twinkle in his eye. "I done prayed, and it's settled. Everything going to be fine. I can feel it in my bones."

"I sure hope you're right." Sandy settled back and cuddled the baby. Cracking the window a bit for some fresh air, she made herself stop watching the road and focused on the familiar countryside.

From the ground itself, a little measure of peace filled the breeze. Slowly, it soaked into her soul, then as they crossed Cypress Creek, the sense of home filled her eyes with tears. She belonged here.

The horror of the last year still haunted her, but home was the place where nightmares got fixed.



John Harris stood by his Ford, while the black man drove his daughter's Cadillac up the lane. He didn't cotton to having a colored in his house, but he'd make an exception for Anthony.

The car came to a stop, and the man jumped out and opened Sandy's door. If only Em and Travis were here, he'd have his whole family under his roof again at one time.

He helped Anthony unload both cars, showed him where everything went, then slipped into his room and opened his closet door. John listened a minute. The women were in the kitchen fussing over the baby.

Behind his good suit, his fingers found the wooden box. Quickly, he removed his revolver and stuck it inside his shirt. He closed the door and turned around.

His wife stood in the doorway. "You think that's necessary?"

"Yes, Miranda, I do." He grabbed his hat and walked toward his wife.

She held out her hands. "We need to talk about this."

"No, we don't. I'm going to Marble and talk to Ike, then I'm stopping by the Pine Bluff Holiness Church."

"Didn't I hear you say this was family business and we didn't need to call the law?"

"Yes, you did."

"Then why are you going to see the sheriff?"

“Ike’s family.”

“Third cousin once removed.”

“And—” He stepped around her and through the door. “If I have to shoot my son-in-law, I’d like for the authorities to know the story ahead of time.”

Chapter Fifty-three



T

“ here.” His daughter pointed to Buddy’s left.

“See ’em, Dad?”

The headlights illuminated two does, grazing on a small knoll just off the highway. Partially hidden by cedars and underbrush, they looked up. Their eyes eerie with the reflection.

“How many is that?”

“Twenty-two deer, three raccoons, four bunnies, two armadillos, and a phew-wee skunk.” She twisted backward as the car sped by then turned to the front again. “How come there’s so many deer in Texas?”

“I don’t know, but there’s sure a bunch.”

With the wind blowing her hair away from her face, Amanda propped her elbows on the window frame and stared at the South Texas landscape barely visible by the false dawn that cast a mellow pale light.

Live oaks and cedars dominated the wooded areas, only occasionally breaking into a few man-cleared fields and meadows. He glanced over his shoulder. His wife still slept curled in the backseat.

For maybe the last fifty or so miles, he and Mandy counted whitetails caught in the headlights. It pleased him his daughter liked the rugged beauty of the Lone Star State and its abundance of wildlife.

“Daddy?”

“What, Baby?”

“I don’t understand about David.”

He gripped the wheel until his knuckles turned white then made himself relax. “What don’t you understand? I thought Mama explained it all last night.”

"She kinda did, but . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"But what?"

"Well, you and Mama love each other. Right?"

"Of course."

"Then how come you made a baby with that Sandy lady?"

Buddy stretched. How could he answer?

"I knew Sandy before I met your mother. We wanted to get married, but her father wouldn't let us. A couple of years ago, when I was traveling with Eli, we went to Dallas, and I ran into her."

He glanced over. The confusion in his daughter's eyes stabbed his heart. He had been such a fool.

Oh Lord, my sins have brought me low.

"I made a mistake, sweetheart. I never meant to hurt anybody, especially you and Mama, but now I have." He sighed. "I guess a bunch of folks are paying for what I did, but I praise the Lord that He forgives. Can you forgive me, Amanda?"

"Sure, Dad." She turned in the seat and faced him. "Is Sandy's husband really crazy?"

"That's what she said."

"What about my brother? Is he going to live with us now?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"He needs to be with his mother."

She nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

The rolling hills of South Texas flew by as Buddy pondered his dilemma. He hated all the pain his actions had caused. Bless the Lord though that he told Abby back when. At least Sandy's calling hadn't been a complete shock.

"Daddy, how come you and Sandy made a baby when you didn't want to, and you and Mama only have me when I want a brother or sister so bad?"

Buddy saw her logic, but didn't know how to answer again. "I guess you need to ask Mama about that."

"Why?"

"You sure ask a lot of questions, you know it?"

"How else am I going to know things, if I don't ask? Doesn't the Bible say ask and ye shall receive? Well, I've asked, now I want to receive an answer."

"You're asking the wrong person though. You need to ask your mother."

"Ask me what?"

Amanda turned around in the seat.

Buddy winked into the rearview mirror. "Good morning, sweetheart. Feel all refreshed?"

“Yeah right. Not much. Ask me what?”

Amanda climbed into the back seat and hugged her mother. “Daddy said I should ask you why I don’t have a baby brother or sister.”

“Not now, Mandy.”

“Why not? Seems like a real good time for a talk to me.”

Abigail tapped him on the shoulder. “Where are we?”

“Fifteen or twenty miles from Llano.”

“Well, find somewhere to stop.”

He nodded and adjusted his mirror so he could see both his girls.

“Why not, Mama?”

His wife wrapped her arm around his daughter and kissed her nose. “ ’Cause I said.”

“That’s not fair. I wanna know.”

A grin threatened to turn into a chuckle, but Buddy bit the inside of his cheek. That girl sure had a persistent streak. The car topped a hill, and a flying red horse glowed over the next rise.

“Looks like there’s a gas station ahead.”

“Good.” Abigail fished out her brush and went to work on her hair.

Mandy scooted into the floor out of Buddy’s line of sight. She would sulk awhile then be back on her mother in no time. Maybe another baby might be a good idea.

At the station, he checked his directions then gathered a sack of home-fried pies, two Baby Ruth’s, a Zero, and a quart of milk. The attendant was just finishing checking under the hood when he paid the bill.

While the princess took her turn in the restroom, he pulled Abigail aside. “You better come up with a reason, or you know she’s going to hound you day and night.”

“I’m thinking she may have a pretty good idea.” She smiled. “I’ve been thinking along those lines myself for a while, even before Sandy called. The circumstances just make it seem like now would be a good time.”

He kissed her full on the lips then hugged her. “When do you want to get started?”

Hugging him back, she sighed in his ear, “Soon as this is all over.”



Exactly thirty-five miles as the crows flew due west, Buddy’s father enjoyed the cool of the morning, sitting on Travis Buckmyer’s front porch. He loved the antebellum mansion.

Only the Lord knew how Travis had managed to restore its

original splendor with only hand tools and one hired man. After Emma Lee miscarried the third time, he almost drove himself to an early grave working on it day and night.

But finally finished, Travis had found some peace. Nathaniel sipped his coffee and relished the sun's masterpiece splashed across the sky, painted as it peeped over the horizon. He loved sitting on the porch of a morning.

The very best time of day. Behind him, the screen door creaked open then closed, accompanied by the rustle of a full skirt. He didn't bother looking. Emma Lee had joined him every morning since his arrival.

"Good morning, Reverend."

"That it is." He held up his cup, and she refilled it. "Travis up?"

She set the pot down and took the chair next to his. "He left out better than two hours ago."

"Strange. I didn't hear him."

"Oh, it's just his way. If he's a mind to, he can come and go without a body ever knowing."

"You don't say." Nathaniel drained his cup and reached for the pot, but a distant dust cloud caught his attention. "Looks like he's decided to come back."

Emma stood and walked to the porch's edge. The lilac wisteria framed her. The shades of lavender sure complimented her waist-long curly red hair. He'd watched her blossom from a teen into a beautiful young woman devoted to her husband and to the Lord. She turned toward him.

"That's not Travis."

Nathaniel joined her. "How can you tell?"

"For one thing, he left on horseback heading west. It's pretty obvious whoever the fool is raising that dust cloud hasn't driven over our ruts before, or he'd be taking it a bit easier."

Had to chuckle at Emma Lee's wisdom. "That cattle trail you call a road is pretty bad. When you going to sell a couple of head and get it paved?"

Leaning against the huge column to her right, she smiled. "I suppose never. I wouldn't trade our rainy days for nothing." She winked at him. "If we got that road fixed, no telling who might wander up."

A pang of regret tried to worm its way into his heart—sounded like something his Evelyn would say—but he wouldn't have it. Blessed with those wonderful years—though certainly too few—with a near perfect wife, he's experienced the best of love.

Soon enough, they'd be together again.

The dust cloud neared the final turn, and Nathaniel pulled his

thoughts to the present.

A road-weary Ford materialized through the pair of cedars that guarded the road up to the house. He couldn't make the driver at first, then recognized his son. "Well, bless the Lord. Look who it is."

"Oh my!" Emma shaded her eyes and stared. "Is that Buddy?"

"I believe it is, and looks like he's brought Amanda and Abigail with him. What a treat."

The sedan stopped in front of the house. Nathaniel stood and paddled toward the car, hardly able to believe his son had showed up. It'd be wonderful to have him sing at meeting that night.

Buddy climbed out. "Hey, old man. Couldn't you've found somewhere a little more remote to hide? I sure found you easy enough."

His father beamed as he knelt and held out his arms for Amanda. "Mercy, child, looks like you've grown a foot since I saw you last." He looked at his daughter-in-law. "Better put a book on her head, a heavy one."

Mandy kissed her grandfather's cheek then hugged his neck. "No, I don't need a book! I've only grown an inch. Mama marks it on the inside of the kitchen door."

Hurrying around the car, he reached his father just as Abigail finished her greeting and stuck out his hand. "Good to see you, Dad."

"You're looking fine, Son." He shook Buddy's hand then pulled him to his chest. "Man, it's good to have you here."

"Might change your mind after I tell why we came." He spotted Emma Lee on the porch and waved, then herded everyone toward the house. "Where's Travis?"

"Hunting new calves. He'll be back this afternoon."

Buddy pointed to chairs littering the porch. "Well, better sit down. I've got a story you need to hear."

The deeper he got into his tale, the more Emma Lee's expression changed. He hated the mess he was ultimately responsible for, but time had come to face the truth. His sins had found him out. Couldn't get out of reaping what he'd sown.

Finally, he finished the confession of truth.

Nathaniel scratched his head. "What are you going to do, Son?"

"At first I was going to come get you and just take you back to Georgia, but I don't think that's what we need to do now."

Abigail grabbed his arm. "Why not?"

"I'm the one responsible for this mess. I can't run away from it."

Chapter Fifty-four



omething poked Jac.

“What?”

“Wake up. We’re almost there.” Prescott handed him a thermos.

Jac rubbed sleep from his eyes and stared out the window. The Rolls headlights bathed the road and fence rows of live oaks and cedar, but that didn’t tell him much. They could be anywhere in the Hill Country. “Exactly where are we?”

“About five miles from Pine Bluff.”

“What time is it?”

“O-three-sixteen.”

Jac stretched his neck, then popped his knuckles. He wanted to be ready for the preacher. He could almost feel the man’s throat on the tips of his fingers. “What are we going to do if old man Nightingale’s not there?”

“He’ll have an address book or some of Buddy’s mail. We’ll find him. Don’t worry about that.”

“Good.” Jac leaned back into the leather seat. A smile settled on his lips. It was perfect. He would kill Buddy Nightingale, and even if they caught him, it wouldn’t matter.

Since he’d just spent the last year in the nut house, he’d have the perfect plea, and Nightingale would be six feet under where he belonged.

“Make any difference to you who actually pulls the trigger?”

“Not a bit, just as long as I see him dead.”

“Good, because it would mean a great deal to me if I got the honor.”

Prescott slowed then turned onto the gravel road next to the

church. "Be quiet." He cut the lights.

Jac waited until the Rolls stopped then slipped out. Prescott joined him at the front of the car. "The house is behind the church." He pointed at a darker shade of gray. "You take the back door. I got the front."

Five minutes later, Jac met his leader in Nightingale's living room. "What now, captain?"

"We wait." He tossed him the car keys. "Find some place to hide the Rolls."

"Yes, sir." Jac resisted the urge to salute then trotted off. He could wait. Revenge was best eaten cold.



Over in Cypress Springs, about seven miles southeast if a person could fly a straight line, John Harris chewed over the mess his baby had gotten him into.

Sometime after Miranda's breathing deepened into a soft snore, he gave up on trying to get any sleep and took to the porch.

Even though he had smoked his tongue raw, he fished out his makings. Smoking made tough decisions a little easier, and he had a hard one to make. Almost like he was in France again. He hated that war, hated being in harm's way.

He'd done his duty, but that seemed so easy compared to killing a man you'd been pleased to call your son-in-law—a good man once, a sick, dangerous man.

A part of him wanted to shoot Harry on sight, but could he really kill him just to save Buddy? Sandy or David weren't in any immediate danger, but the man was crazier than a Betsy bug.

John lit the cigarette, but before he could take a drag, a familiar sound pulled him to his feet.

High beams lit a tree off to the south. He walked to the end of the porch. A second set of lights trailed the first. He shifted the revolver from his pocket to his belt. The cars rounded the last turn. His heart pounded.

The gravel's crush under the tires reminded him of machine gun fire. He pulled out the revolver and let it hang at his leg. The lead car turned down his lane.

The headlights of the second silhouetted the front passenger's long bushy hair. Emma Lee and Travis. John exhaled, stuck the gun back in his pocket and headed for the gate.

His daughter jumped out. "Papa, what are you doing up?"

"What are you doing here at this hour?" He opened the gate and

held it. "Who's that with you?"

The second car stopped. Emma glanced over her shoulder. "Nathaniel was staying with us while he helped Travis preach our revival. Buddy came to get him, and they were on the way to Pine Bluff. We talked about it and decided we'd come, too."

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Get your mother. Sandra's in her old room, and there's a black man name of Tony in yours. Take care not to wake the baby."

Emma pecked his cheek. "You okay with Buddy being here?"

He nodded. "Go on."



Buddy stayed in his car while Emma Lee talked with Mister John. He hadn't planned on stopping, but couldn't resist. Abigail and Amanda were asleep in the back seat, and the old man looked like something the cats dragged in—that the dogs didn't want.

"What do you think, Dad?"

"Not much." Nathaniel opened his door. "I'm stretching my legs."

Buddy glanced over his shoulder.

Abigail yawned and raised her head. "Where are we?"

"The Harris place."

"Is Sandy here?"

Before he could answer, his door opened. John Harris motioned with his head. "Get out and come in. If I know my wife, she'll already have the coffee boiling."

Climbing out, he extended his hand. "How you doing, Mister John?"

"Been better."

"Me, too." A car door shut. Chin held high, Abigail joined them. "This is my wife, Abby, and asleep there in the back is our daughter, Amanda."

"Nice to meet you, Mis'ess Nightingale. Y'all go on in and get some coffee. I'm gonna stay out here and keep an eye out. Nathaniel, want to keep me company? Something I want to talk over."

"Sure, John. Bring me a cup of that coffee if you would, Son."

Just as Mister John predicted, Miranda had a pot of coffee before the cat could lick himself twice. Man, more than strange for Buddy to have his feet under the sweet lady's kitchen table again, especially with Abigail sitting beside him.

So much water had passed under the bridge, but it seemed like it had been only last week since he courted Sandy. A what-if knocked, but he refused to open that door. He would never wish away Abigail

or Amanda.

The back door opened, and a black man carrying a load of stove wood stepped in. "This be enough, Miss Miranda?"

"Thank you, Anthony, that'll be just fine. Now you take a seat and have a cup of coffee."

"I'll take the coffee, but I best stay out on the porch with Mister John."

She grabbed a cup from the cabinet and headed for the stove. "Suit yourself."

"Mis'ess Harris, you might send a couple of extra cups out."

"I sure will. That'll empty this pot, and I can put on a fresh one."

Abigail put her mouth close to Buddy's ear. "Who's that man?"

"I don't know."

Miranda sat back down. "Anthony's a male nurse. He's been helping Sandra Louise with Harry."

Buddy studied the woman who should have been his mother-in-law. "Tell me true, Mis'ess Harris. You think Harry is capable of murder?"

From the living room where Sandy had been eaves-dropping, a part of her wanted to scream. It galled her so that the sound of his voice still commanded such an effect on her. She sighed. It always would.

Give him half a chance, Buddy Nightingale, and he will. You'll be a dead man.

How could he have been so cruel to bring his wife? Sometimes she wished Harry would kill him, but her heart couldn't have that.

She stiffened her back and strolled toward the kitchen just like Nana taught her. In the doorway, she stopped. His eyes met hers.

Oh, Buddy.

Her heart stilled then pounded double time. He was as handsome as ever. Something in her throat choked off her breath. Why did she love him so much?

He stood, his eyes never leaving hers. "Sandy, I'd like for you to meet my wife."

So this was the woman who'd ruined her life. Couldn't deny her beauty, she looked nothing like Sandy had imagined. In her mind's eye, Buddy's wife had always been overweight and ugly.

No wonder the bum married her instead of coming back to Cypress Springs. What man could have resisted such a vamp? Maybe she understood a little, but it sure didn't make her feel any better.

The petite beauty smiled, stood and stuck out her hand. "I'm Abigail."

Sandy swallowed and tried to return the gesture. She should claw her eyes out, but did the ladylike thing and took her hand. "Nice to

meet you.”

She cut a quick glance to Buddy, but he was grinning at his wife. It looked like he loved her. Tears collected in her eyes and threatened to fall. How could he? Sandy had never loved anyone but him.

Giving the interloper's hand a little squeeze, she let her gaze fall, then with both hands, covered her face, rubbed her eyes, then combed her hair straight back with her fingers. She couldn't look her in the eyes.

Her own were still watery, and she couldn't have his wife see that, so instead, she turned toward the sink.

“I hate this mess I've dragged y'all into. I feel like it's all my fault.” She grabbed a cup from the cabinet and headed for the coffee. “Poor Harry. I never wanted anyone to get hurt.” Sandy glanced toward Buddy, who studied his fingernails.

“Hopefully, no one will, but in any case, you shouldn't blame yourself.” His wife—she hated it but that's who Abigail was—put a hand on her shoulder. “Blame the devil. He's the one out to kill, steal, and destroy.”

“That's the truth.” Her mother took over the sink duties. “Move on over and go sit down, Sandra Louise.”

Oh, but his wife had more to say. “Thank goodness God's still on the throne. You know He'll take care of us. He always does.”

Sandy raised her eyebrows and poured her cup three-quarters full of half-brewed coffee. Thank goodness Mister John wasn't present for the mini-sermon. Buddy had married himself a little preacher woman. How Pentecostal of him.

“We can pray He does.” She sipped her coffee and sat across from Buddy, but made herself look at his wife. “So, what are y'all's plans?”

Abigail draped her arm over Buddy's shoulder and massaged his neck. “We were going to get Dad Nightingale and head straight back for Georgia, but I guess we'll be spending a few days in Pine Bluff.”

Sandy's chest tightened. “Why would you do that?”

Abigail frowned, but didn't say anything. Sandy looked at Buddy.

“I'm the one responsible for what's happened, and I'm not running away again. Besides, Dad's asked me to lead the singing. He's got a meeting scheduled to start Saturday night.”

So he was sorry he ran. Her cheeks warmed. She hoped the blush wasn't apparent. If only— Sandy made herself focus.

If only she could convince Buddy that Harry would kill him, and that the best thing for him to do was to get as far away as possible. Yet down deep, she wanted him to stay even though she knew he was in danger. At least, he was close.

She would never have dreamed he'd be sitting at her mother's table again.

Miranda finally took a seat herself. "Well, then you better get yourself a gun. Sandra says if Harry's even thinking halfway straight, you won't stand a chance."

He smiled the soft grin that Sandy loved then shook his head. "I didn't have a gun when I landed on Omaha beach. I'm not about to take one up now."

The front screen slammed. A child's voice broke the silence. "Mama? Daddy?"

"In here, baby."

A sleepy-eyed dark-haired beauty peeked into the kitchen. She ran straight to her father and climbed into his lap. The little girl looked so much like David, like a female Buddy. She should have been Sandy's daughter.

Tears threatened again, but her mother saved her.

"You must be Amanda. Let me get you a pillow and blanket, sweetheart, and you can go back to sleep on the couch."

Buddy emptied his cup with a gulp and stood. "Thanks, Mis'ess Harris, but we really should be leaving. I don't want to impose."

"Nonsense. You're not imposing a bit." She stood and put her hand on Buddy's shoulder. "Now sit back down. You can't leave until I get you some breakfast. I won't hear of it. You need some home cooking."

He looked at his wife. "You hungry, hon?"

Miranda put the bacon on and started the biscuits. The conversation was easy and relaxed, but the tightness in Sandy's chest lingered. Abigail seemed so nice, so sweet, and by the looks she gave Buddy, obviously in love.

A pitiful wail echoed upstairs. Sandy looked at him, and her heart almost stopped.

"Guess David's up. I'll go get him before he wakes Amanda."

Buddy smiled as she rose and left. Pride swelled Sandy's heart. She was fixing to introduce him to his son. She skipped half the stairs on the way to the nursery. The baby stood holding the crib's side rail.

When David saw her, he immediately stopped crying and smiled that smile, his father's smile. He bobbed with excitement and squealed.

"Good morning, my little man." She grabbed a diaper off the chifforobe. "Are you wet?"

A little hand waved. "Bye bye."

"Silly, boy. Guess who's here to see you." Cooing, she changed his diaper then lifted him to her hip. "It's your daddy. Your real daddy. And he's going to love you so much." The swelling in her chest choked her. She traced his face with her finger. "Oh, David."

The little fellow stared at her then puckered his bottom lip several

times in rapid succession. His blue eyes filled with tears. He patted her cheek. "Wuv woo."

Sandy gave him a big hug, rolled him to his back, then pretended to eat his neck. "I love you, too, you precious angel."

What would she do without him? Poor Buddy for missing so much of his life.

"It's going to be okay, little man. You're going to meet your daddy." She checked herself in the dresser mirror on the way by, fluffed her hair, and headed for the kitchen.



A high-pitched squeal pulled Buddy to his feet. He patted Abigail's shoulder then scooted around the table. Sandy walked in holding his son. The baby, bigger than he expected, smiled. A pain stabbed his heart as David looked him over.

Then the boy reached across his mother's arm with extended hands. Love, repentance, envy, and gratitude choked him. He cleared his throat. "May I?"

"Certainly."

He held out his hands just as David fell into them. The baby's chubby cheek made for good kissing. He hugged him to his chest. "Bless my son, Lord. Make him a man after Your own heart."

The instant connection overwhelmed him. David cuddled into Buddy's neck and stretched his little arms the width of his shoulders. He patted the boy's firm back all the way back to his chair then held him out for Abby to see.

His wife patted the dimpled chin, and was rewarded with a glowing smile.

"What a happy boy so early in the morning." She glanced at Sandy. "He's beautiful," then turned back. "Yes, he is. Looks just like his handsome daddy, I'd say."

Way before Sandy was ready, the Nightingales were through eating.

"Thank you for that breakfast, Mis'ess Harris. Sure was good to see you again, but we best get on to Pine Bluff."

"Well, it wasn't much, but you're sure welcomed. Y'all ring us later after you've rested some. Maybe we'll know something."

Sandy remained seated. "Bye, Buddy. If only it could have been under different circumstances, but still, it was nice to meet you, Abigail."

"You, too. I'm glad now I finally have a face to go with the name. I know you were very important to Buddy, and that you loved him,

but I hope we can still be friends.”

Her words stunned Sandy, knocked her breath out, but she thought she managed a smile. How much did Abigail know? What had Buddy told her? And why would he have told her anything about them anyway?

She sure hadn't told Harry any more than she had to, and had even done everything she could to keep the whole truth from him then. Her cheeks were burning again. She kept her seat when everyone made their way to the living room.

How could she stand to see him leave again? And she hated it that Abigail seemed to know all about her and Buddy's private relationship. A wave of heat blasted her. She could have breathed fire.

Who does she think she is?

Well, no matter. Nothing's over yet, Little Miss Perfect. But as the anger washed back, sadness rolled in. In her heart of hearts, she knew it was. Over. A piece of her died.

The tears she had fought all night burst loose. She got up and ran out the back door then kept running through the gate until she reached the far pasture's fence where she collapsed.

Between sobs, she cried out, “Oh God, how can I live without him?”

Sitting out in the cool morning on the damp grass, a warmth settled over like a blanket and brought comfort. Such a remarkable peace filled her heart that she stopped crying. From nowhere in her head, a place she had never heard from before, a voice spoke, and spoke so loud, it startled her.

YOU HAVE DAVID

Chapter Fifty-five



ittle David's baby scent hung in Buddy's nostrils.

How could he drive away from the Harris place?

His son.

Things should have been different, but even though he still wanted Sandy as much right then as he did the first day he'd seen her, he would never give himself the opportunity to do anything stupid again.

What he wanted most was to stay in the Lord's perfect will. And, he loved his family. He rounded the curve and downshifted as he neared the creek.

Abigail scooted over and leaned against his shoulder. She didn't look at him when she whispered, "Do you still love her?"

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

He hesitated a second then nodded against her head, his cheek brushing her sweet smelling hair. "But that doesn't change anything." He eased through about two inches of water, reached the creek's far side and shot up the hill.

"That doesn't change the fact that I love you. You are my wife." He kissed the top of her head.

"Son." The reverend touched his left shoulder. "I know it's early, but I need to stop at the Jones' farm before we go home."

He met his father's eyes in the rear view mirror. "So long as you're sure they're not going to make us eat another breakfast."

"I hope not. I'm full as a tick." The old man chuckled and leaned back.

Buddy returned his full attention to the road so he wouldn't miss the turnoff.

Had he known that Harry Prescott was at his father's house right then, searching through the old man's things, looking for a clue to his whereabouts, Buddy might have wrestled with what to do about Sandy's husband.

The man's insanity certainly occupied the bulk of his thoughts since they left Dalton, but since seeing his son, right that minute, David took forefront in his mind. Seeing him had been like looking at the two baby pictures he had of himself.

He wanted his son to be his, with him full time. He wanted to watch him grow and help him find his way in this world. A boy needed his father to teach him how to be a man.

'If only' echoed through his soul again, and for a second, he toyed with the notion of having both women, but instantly chided himself for being a fool.

Then a 'what if' tried to worm it's way to his heart, but he rebuked it and told himself to stop with the regrets. Nothing he could do about the situation. He'd sown to the wind and was reaping the whirlwind.



Buddy pulled into the Jones' lane, just as Harry Prescott picked up the reverend's phone. "Operator, I'd like to make a person-to-person call to Buddy Nightingale in Dalton, Georgia. And make it collect."

"Number, please?"

Harry read the number from Nightingale's address book. On the third ring, a woman answered.

"Good evening, ma'am. This is the operator. I have a person-to-person, collect call for Mister Buddy Nightingale."

Harry held his breath.

"I'm sorry, but Buddy's gone to Texas to visit the Reverend Nightingale. I don't think he's had time to make it yet though."

Harry interrupted. "That's okay. Thanks, operator. I'll try again later." He broke the connection, put the little desk in order, then checked the front room. Everything looked in its place.

"So he's come to Texas. Perfect." He pulled the string on the single naked bulb that hung by its cord from the ceiling. It disgusted him Nightingale hadn't bothered to have a fixture installed with all the dough he probably had stashed.

The old fraud was too busy raking in more miracle bucks and spreading his lies about healing. He sure didn't help Harry's precious mother any.

The Rolls was right where he'd told the soldier to park it. "Scoot

over.”

“Yes, sir.” Jac jumped out and held the door open. “What’d you find?”

Handing him a revival flyer, he nodded toward the passenger side. “Looks like the old man’s in Llano preaching a meeting.” He handed him the second paper once the boy was seated. “But he’s got another one here, starting Saturday night.”

“So we going to Llano?”

“No. I called Buddy’s house, and the woman who answered said he’s gone to Texas to visit his father.”

“What are we going to do?”

“There’s this nice little hotel in Austin. I thought we could spend a few days relaxing then be back here for church Saturday night.” Harry started the Rolls.

“Yes, sir. That sounds mighty fine to me.” Jac sank into the soft leather.

“Yes, sir is right. A holiday with sweet revenge for dessert. Ever been to Austin?”

“Yeah, even toured the capital building once when I was a kid. Sure looks like my luck has turned ever since I hooked up with you, Captain.”

The soldier relaxed and seemed to enjoy the ride. Didn’t even bother doing much looking once Harry passed the city limits, just kept his head nestled deep in the Rolls’ plush leather.

By the time Harry pulled into the circular drive of the elegant building, the boy had nodded off, but sat erect the minute he turned the engine off.

One of the bellboys grabbed the passenger door and pulled it open. With eyes as wide as a kid at a circus, Jac glanced over and gawked. Dressed in a crisp red coat with tails down to his knees and gold braid on both shoulders, the bell captain held Harry’s door.

“Captain? You sure about this place? It must cost fifty dollars a night.”

“At least, but don’t worry about it. Enjoy yourself.” He laughed. “We’re on R & R. Remember?”

“Yes, sir.”

At the front desk, he signed the register then touched the boy’s arm as he reached for the suitcases. “They’ll get them.” He nodded toward a bellboy. The fascination on the soldier’s face amused him.

Carpenter strolled through the ornate lobby. Apparently, he had never been in a five-star hotel. The elevator glided to a perfect stop on the fifth floor, then in nothing flat, the bellboy settled them in their suite, received his tip and was on his way.

“You take that one.” Harry nodded toward what looked to be the

smaller of two rooms off the living area.

With his hands on his hips, Jac shook his head. "Man, I never dreamed there were hotels like this. Did you really give that guy in the monkey suit five dollars for carrying our bags?"

Harry smiled. "He's a friend."

"You stay here much?"

"Whenever I'm in Austin." He pulled out his bankroll and peeled off three fifties. "There's a men's store two blocks east." He stuck out the money. "If memory serves, you didn't pack any church clothes."

Jac hung back. "You don't have to buy me a suit, sir. I can go dressed like I am. Buddy Nightingale will be just as dead, no matter what I wear."

"True enough, but we may want to step out before Saturday, and a gentleman always dresses the part."

The boy still hung back, looking like his pride was suffering. Harry smiled.

"Take the money. There's plenty more where this came from." He stepped over and stuffed the bills in Jac's shirt pocket. "Go on. Buy whatever you want, and if that's not enough cash, charge it to my name. I've got an account."

The corners of the soldier's mouth turned up slightly. "A new suit might be just what I need." His head bobbed as though the idea was gaining speed. "Maybe I should find the Sears and Roebuck though."

"Don't be ridiculous." Harry held both hands palms forward. "You'll like the place I'm sending you to, and don't worry about money."

Jac straightened and looked like he was itching to salute. "Yes, sir."

Harry had always loved having money. Shame Sandy couldn't have been there to see the look on Jac's face when he walked into the lobby, but she couldn't have any part of his and Jac's operation.

Nightingale had to die. Harry would never be whole again until the preacher was six feet under.

A cloud covered his soul.

Was that right?

Did Buddy have to die?

The question called to a deep part of him.

For some reason, his death suddenly didn't seem as paramount.

Tinkling metal interrupted his thoughts. He cocked his head to listen harder. Tiny cymbals making their music stood the hair on the back of his neck on end. A chill ran down his spine.

"Don't be fooled, Harrison." Calliope's words floated on the fragrance of honeysuckle and roses.

The ghost of his long-dead nanny materialized and jingled her

bangle bracelets just as she had when he was a child. Her skin had a bluish cast, and her long mottled silver-black hair hung in wads from beneath the multi-colored scarf tied around her head.

That old bony finger had pointed at him plenty of times. She shook it with vigor.

“Don’t you be fooled, my little pigeon.” Her sweet voice settled him. Calliope would tell him what to do. “The preacher has to die. You’ll never be whole until he is no more.”

He swallowed hard. What do you say to a ghost? Was Nightingale’s death really that important? His chest tingled. He grabbed the medallion around his neck. It pulsed as though with life of its own.

“See here, old Calliope sent you this soldier. Use him, Harrison. He’ll kill Nightingale for us, but you’ve got to make it happen. My boy’s the brains.” The little cymbals jingled again, then the old gypsy vanished leaving only the sweet aroma of the flowers.

Harry continued to hold the icon Calliope had given him. Hate and a pounding desire for revenge flowed from it.

She was right.

The preacher had to die.

Chapter Fifty-six



andy took the wet plate from her mother.

She tried not to think, but couldn't keep her mind from racing between Buddy and her husband. It'd been five days since she'd seen him, and nothing. Could Harry have gotten himself killed or something by now?

She hated herself for thinking how his being dead would solve something. Since he escaped, neither hide nor hair had been seen of him. The longer he stayed gone, the more she wanted never to see him again.

That morning, she'd spent three hours calling every sheriff and police chief in the ten counties that circled Cypress Springs. No one had seen Harry or the Rolls, and yes, every man-jack promised, she'd be the first to know if they did.

She grabbed another dinner plate and wiped it dry. Images of Buddy crowded thoughts of her crazy husband. For a split second, she let herself fantasize about a life with him. If she were free . . .

Then she hated herself all over again for wishing Harry dead.

Would Buddy leave his wife? Sandy pondered the question while she finished drying the silverware. Would she divorce Harry if Buddy was free? Wonder how Papa would react to that?

Probably disown her. Oh, well. She put away the last fork.

"What else, Mother?"

"Guess that's it till breakfast tomorrow."

Spreading the dish towel over the edge of the sink, she untied her apron. "Have you seen Anthony and David?"

"I think they're out in the barn with your father."

Sandy headed that direction. Just as she reached the porch, the

phone rang one long. She froze. A short followed by another long. Their ring. She dashed for the parlor.

“Harris residence.”

“Mister John there?”

“He’s out in the barn, can I take a message?”

“Tell him to call Ike when he gets a chance.”

Sandy nodded then remembered Ike was the sheriff of Burnett County. “Ike? Excuse me, but this is Sandy Prescott. Have you seen my husband?”

For too long only silence greeted her, then the caller cleared his throat. “Your daddy said I should only talk with him.”

Oh, how these country bumpkins irritated her. How dare her father, too. “Sheriff, if you know something about my husband, you should tell me. I’m the one who should get any word, not Papa. I’m his wife.”

“Well, we don’t know if it’s him or not, but one of my deputies spotted a silver Rolls about half an hour ago.”

Sandy’s heart skipped a beat then jumped into her throat. “Where? Which way was it headed?”

“Could have been going several places. Marble or Pine Bluff. Who knows?”

“Why didn’t your deputy stop him?” Sandy wanted to scream, but kept her voice under control.

“Far as I know, your husband, if that’s who it was, ain’t broke any laws.”

“Well, you may not know he was in a mental institution before I took him home. He escaped and could be dangerous. I would sure appreciate it if anyone even thinks it’s him to at least stop him and detain him until I can get there.”

She sighed into the receiver, a little sorry for her sharp tone, but up to her eyeballs with small town ineptness. “Anyway, I do thank you for calling. If you hear anything else, get in touch with me, please. Not my father.”

Forcing herself to place the phone gently back on its hook, she filled her lungs then walked toward the barn. The rays of the just-departed sun highlighted the wispy clouds in the western sky with a pink and golden kiss and lit the hill country with a dusky glow.

Halfway, it struck her.

Buddy would be leading the singing at Pine Bluff that night. Emma Lee and Travis had said they were coming in for it. They might even already be there. Sandy broke into a run.

Somehow Harry must have found out Buddy was going to be there and holed up until today.

“Papa? Anthony? Where are y’all?”



At the exact same moment, Buddy wondered where they were going to put everyone. The church building wouldn't hold the folks who'd already shown up, and there was a line of cars waiting to get into the parking lot.

He shook hands and well-wished his way from the building to his father's little house out back. He found the old man playing checkers with Amanda.

"Hey, Dad. You looked outside lately?"

The reverend tore his eyes off the game board. "Ain't it something? You're still packing 'em in, Son."

"What are we going do with all these folks?"

Amanda waved him away. "Daddy. Grandpa's already taken care of things. Now leave us be. I've got him just where I want him."

"Oh, you do?" He faced his father. "And exactly what have you arranged?"

"Some of the boys are getting folding chairs from the Baptists. The Methodists are bringing some more. We'll move the pews out onto the grounds, and there will be plenty of room. Now do like Mandy says and leave us be."

He watched the next couple of moves then wandered into the kitchen. Abigail smiled and held out a glass of lemonade. "You getting cold feet?"

He took the drink. "Heavens, no. It's just I hate things not being organized."

She kissed his cheek. "Seems to me your father has everything under control. He's been doing it a long while, so I guess he knows how." She glanced toward the sitting room. "Well, maybe not the checker game."

And she was right.

The pews got moved, folding chairs set out and a ten-by-ten platform erected. Someone even strung two rows of light bulbs. It almost looked like a used car lot, but Buddy loved it. Even the weather cooperated.

The January evening felt more like late spring, but that was Texas for you.

Just as the sunset's final bow spread a blanket of nighttime stars over the still-growing congregation, the reverend stepped onto the little platform and held up his hands. The crowd of at least three hundred hushed.

"Welcome, welcome, folks. I know why y'all came tonight, and it

sure wasn't to hear me preach." A strained laugh rippled through the congregation. The reverend motioned toward Buddy who joined him.

"If you don't already know, this is my boy, Buddy." His father whispered. "Man, it's great having you lead the signing again." He patted his shoulder then stepped down.

Buddy allowed himself a few seconds to scan the crowd. It'd been too long. He pointed to a woman sitting in the second row holding a tambourine. "Could I borrow that, sister?"

"Course, Reverend Nightingale." She tossed the little drum.

He caught it and smiled. "No, that's my dad. Just call me Buddy." He slapped the instrument against his thigh and opposite palm in one fluid motion then shouted.

"Bless the Lord, oh my soul!" From the depths of his spirit, he broke into a joyful song and belted out the words of King David's psalms to the new lively tune. The crowd listened for a few bars then joined him.

As he finished, his song-well opened, and like a river, the music flowed. He praised however the Spirit moved him. Like a new baby craving mother's milk, he hungered for more of God's Holy Ghost, longed to enter into His presence.



Hiding in the shadow of a live oak just off the parking lot, Jac hungered, too, but only preacher's blood would sate his appetite. He leaned in close to Prescott. "How do you want to do him, Captain?"

"Let's watch a minute. I've never seen the fool in action before."

"He's a corker for sure." Jac snorted. "Yes, sir. He'll be spouting his lies in no time." He fingered the forty-five under his suit coat. "I'd like to cap him one before he curses another poor soul with something like he put on me."

"He'll get his soon enough. Let's watch awhile, then we'll take care of business."

Getting the business out of the way seemed the order of the day to Jac, but he could wait. The preacher wasn't going anywhere.



A mere two hundred feet away, three sets of eyes scanned the crowd, but so far, they'd only spotted the Rolls. Sandy nudged her father. "Is that him?" She pointed toward the middle of the

congregation.

“Where?”

“There. 'Bout half way down on the right. See? In the blue shirt.”

Mister John shaded his eyes. “No, that's one of the Deadman boys. I can't ever remember which one is which.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, girl. Can't you even recognize your own husband?”

“Of course, but it's getting dark and everyone's so crowded in. I just thought—”

“Anthony.” Mister John pointed toward the church building. “Go check and make sure he isn't hiding in there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sandy waited until the black man was out of earshot. “Did you bring your pistol, Papa?”

He nodded. “Come on. Let's check the parking lot.”

Chapter Fifty-seven



lost in the Spirit, Buddy was unaware.

All the hunting and watching and sneaking around eluded him. So absorbed in the Holy Ghost, if a thousand men plotted to take his life, he would neither have known nor cared.

New songs of worship flowed forth, and nothing mattered at that moment but bowing before God's throne and drinking in His glory.

Abruptly, the music in his head stopped.

The unaccustomed inner silence opened his eyes. For a split second, everything seemed the same, then a knowing filled his spirit.

The young soldier from all those years before—the one who'd killed his own father—hid there somewhere in the back shadows.

Like a bad dream that springs to remembrance, the vision God showed him, seen that night in Dallas, flashed again across his mind's eye. No doubt of its truth, but the fact he'd killed before posed no reason to give way to fear.

He hadn't seen his own death, just Jac holding a gun to his head.

Help me, Lord.

He waited a second then held out his arms. "Folks, find your seats, please." With expressions of confusion over his sudden end of the worship, a few sat, then the rest followed. Buddy pointed toward the shadows.

"John Austin Carpenter. I know you're hiding out there. Come on in and show yourself." Every head turned, looked around every direction into the darkness beyond and at each other.

Buddy stepped off the platform and walked toward the back. "Come on, Jac. Whatever you came for, be man enough to step into the light." He raised his volume and turned in a slow circle.

"Do you know Jesus said He was the Light of the World, Jac? He

said He was the Truth, too, and the Way. Said no man comes to the Father, 'cept through Him, Jac. Why don't you just come on in and surrender to Him? Accept His light and His love. No sin is so great His blood can't cover it."



Jac slid the revolver from his belt. He'd show the no-good what he came for all right. Before he could draw a bead, Prescott grabbed his arm. "Wait."

"Why?"

"Do what Nightingale says. Walk on out into the light. While he's watching you, I'll slip through the parking lot, and we'll have him in a crossfire. There will be no escape."

"Why don't I just plug him now? Be done with it?"

The captain patted Jac's arm. "Can't take the chance. If you missed, we'd never get another chance."

Jac mulled it over. "Okay. We'll do it like you say, but I get the first shot."

"Come on, Carpenter." Nightingale taunted. "I know you're out there. God's Spirit told me."

Jac stepped from the shadows. "Yeah, I'm here, but someone else must have clued you. God don't talk to nobody these days."



From the parking lot's edge, Sandy watched in disbelief as the young man stepped into the light. The moment she heard the name Jac Carpenter, images of that soldier from Dallas had sped across her inner eye.

That the guy hadn't hurt Buddy back then was nothing short of a miracle. She grabbed her father's arm and leaned close. "Do something, Papa. That fella's going to kill Buddy."

He pried her fingers off his arm. "Stay here, girl." He stuck his hand into his coat pocket and stepped toward Buddy while Carpenter moved closer.

Hard soles stepping light on gravel pulled her around. Harry, with his eyes glued on Buddy, moved from car to car in the trees' shadows like a stalking panther. Oh, how she would love to wake up from the nightmare.

All the trouble fell on her shoulders, to her account, yet nothing she could do would make it right. She caught up with her father and pointed toward Harry.

Mister John nodded.

A collective gasp pulled her attention back to the congregation. Carpenter stepped under the string of naked light bulbs at the back row of chairs. The gun in his hand aimed right at Buddy.

Even from the distance that separated her and the soldier, she could see the hate that twisted his face. A shudder chilled her. She wanted to scream. Instead, she prayed. "Oh Lord, what should I do?"



Buddy saw Jac's twisted face too, and recognized the minion of Satan named Hate. In his spirit, Buddy knew it wasn't really the boy who hated him, but the demon. "Put the gun down, Jac. You don't want to kill me."

Carpenter laughed and wiggled the weapon in his direction. "You don't know what you're talking about, preacher. Killing you is exactly what I want. I've wanted to ever since—" He steadied the forty-five.

The mirth died as his lips thinned. "Ever since you cursed me with Pork Chop. You think you're so high and mighty. I wish I could ship you there, but I can't, so I'll settle for sending you to hell."

Carpenter brought up his off hand and wrapped it around the gun hand.

"You're a bad man!" Mandy screamed. "Don't you hurt my daddy!"

Buddy glanced over his shoulder. Abigail held his daughter tight and out of harm's way so he turned his attention back to the gunman. "Jac, I didn't curse you. I only told you what the Lord showed me, what He wanted you to hear.

"He wanted to spare you." Buddy stepped forward as he talked. "You wouldn't receive His salvation then, but it's not too late. It's never too late. If you're still breathing, there's time. His grace is still available."

Carpenter backed half a step as Buddy closed the distance between them to ten feet. A man in the back row eased off his chair in a crouch. He looked ready to rush the boy. Buddy held out his hand.

"Everybody just relax. Jac's not going to hurt anyone."

"Oh, I'm not?" Carpenter snarled. "I'm going to kill you, preacher man."

"No. You won't." Buddy held out his hand and eased closer. "Give me the gun, Jac."

The soldier shook his head.

Buddy lowered his voice. "You didn't want to kill the colonel, and you don't want to kill me."

A tear trickled down Jac's cheek. "Liar! I told you before, I didn't kill my dad!"

Buddy reached for the gun.

The wayward soldier grabbed Buddy's hand, twisted his arm around behind his back, then forced him to the ground. He held the pistol to his head.

"Die, you lying holy roller." The trigger clicked. A 'Bless you, Lord', formed on Buddy's lips, but he couldn't mouth the words before the hammer fell.

Involuntarily, he cringed, but nothing happened.

He gave voice to the blessing.

The trigger clicked again, and the hammer fell once more.

Again nothing.

Pandemonium broke out. Women screamed, and men shouted. Some sent thank-you's heavenward. Buddy sensed extra weight, then suddenly, Carpenter was off him, pinned to the ground by the man in the back row.

"Don't hurt him." Buddy grabbed the brother's arm just as he was about to cold-cock Carpenter.

A shot boomed. One of the naked bulbs shattered and sprinkled Buddy with shards of glass.

"Let him up." A voice from the shadows ordered.

Buddy stood, but couldn't see who had fired the shot.



From a tree next to the parking lot about fifteen feet behind his son-in-law, John Harris had seen it all. The confrontation between the boy and Buddy, then Harry firing. Prescott stepped from the shadows and fired again.

A second bulb burst.

The few folks still standing found the ground. Just like in the war, fear and the smell of gun smoke hung heavy. John hated it. He pushed Sandy away and raised his gun, but didn't fire.

"Let him up, I said." Prescott pointed his pistol in Buddy's direction as he stepped closer. "You okay, Jac?"

Carpenter emerged from the pile of men next to Buddy. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay." He brushed his sleeves. "Worthless gun jammed or something."

"Bring Nightingale over here."

John eased to the shadow's edge. "Drop your weapon, Harry."

Prescott stiffened, then whirled around and fired.

The bullet slammed into John like a mule's kick. He righted himself, aimed and pulled the trigger on his service revolver.

Harry grabbed his chest.

The expression on his son-in-law's face changed from grim determination to relief. John thought it strange then his legs gave out, and he crumpled.



"Papa!" Sandy screamed. "Papa, please don't be dead." She rolled him over and cradled his head. Blood seeped onto her skirt. "Be all right. Wake up. Wake up, Papa."

He groaned. "I'm not asleep, girl. See to your husband. Think I killed him."

"Oh, Papa. Praise God you're okay! Thank you, Lord." Sandy kissed her father's forehead then crawled toward Harry.

A dark reddish spot stained his white shirt, just above his monogram. "Harry, oh sweetheart, I'm so sorry." She rubbed his cheek.

He opened his eyes. "Sandra Louise, what are you doing here?"

"I've been looking for you, dear Harry."

He smiled then coughed. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. "I love you, baby." He closed his eyes. "I've loved you from the first."

Tears welled in her eyes. "I know. I know you do. I'm so sorry. So sorry for everything."

"Don't be." His eyes remained on hers as he gasped once then stopped breathing.

"Oh, Harry! Harry, I'm so sorry." She stroked his cheek again. "You deserved better."

His spirit departed.

Everything slowed and turned in on itself.

The shouting and commotion didn't register, nor did she protest as hands pulled her away from her husband. She glanced over her shoulder. Someone threw a blanket over him.

Harry was dead, gone.

Like a dream barely remembered, the trip to Marble unfolded—like she wasn't really herself—not even a witness, but rather a hearer of a tragedy. What had happened seemed only a horrible tale from a faraway land.

She found herself a little when they took her father into Marble Fall's brand spanking new operating room and looked around. Her mother and sister sat on either side of her. Anthony stood against the tiled wall across the hall from where Travis held up the opposite one.

Like a cool breeze on a hot day, the reality of Harry's death washed over her. She was free, really free. The past two years seemed

like a lifetime. Now, she and Buddy could—could what?

Her elation sickened her soul.

She should be grief stricken.

Her husband was dead by her father's hand. And the whole thing was her fault. She should be devastated, but no matter how she scolded herself, she couldn't muster any grief over her Harry's death.

The last year had hardened her heart.

Maybe the responsibility for his breakdown rested in her lap, but hadn't she done everything she could for him; even her own son for the first year of his life? How many years had she suffered?

Years that should have been the best of her life. Years spent with Buddy. But with Harry gone, she was free, and against her better judgement, she fantasized about a life with her true love and David.

Thoughts of the baby straightened her.

Where was David?



Buddy, who had just parked outside the hospital, harbored no doubts as to his son's whereabouts. He leaned over and kissed his wife's cheek. "I won't be long."

She handed him the baby. "You sure you don't want me to come in with you?"

He hefted David to his hip. "No, sweetheart. If you don't mind, I best talk to her alone. Pray for me?"

"Of course. Every minute you're gone. Don't be long."

He smiled then hurried inside. He hated how things had turned out, hated his part and would give anything for the ability to make everything right again.

After one wrong turn, he spotted the Harris clan standing vigil in a waiting room. No one noticed him stop and lean against the wall about twenty feet away—his angel such a short distance away.

Oh, she was more beautiful than ever.

Why? Why Lord, was I so stupid?

David pointed. "Mama."

His true love looked up and smiled. "Oh, David. There you are." She hurried to Buddy's side and took the baby, brushing his arm in the process, then stayed close, too close. Her eyes searched his, searched for something he couldn't let her see.

"How's Mister John?"

She didn't look away. "They haven't told us anything yet. Buddy

—"

He backed up a step and looked up the hall. "I'm sorry about

Harry.” His gaze returned. His eyes drank in the lines of her face, the curves of her lips.

Inwardly, he rebuked the devil then closed his eyes and shook his head. “I wish things would’ve worked out different.”

“It isn’t your fault.”

“But it is. All those years ago—” The scripture promising God wouldn’t allow more temptation than he could withstand popped into his head. This time he stood on it. “I should never have gone to Dallas.”

Sandy pressed her cheek to the baby’s and hugged David. “Well, I’m not sorry for that. I could never regret our son—”

“That’s not what I meant.” He looked away again. Why did she still stir him so? “I’ve got to go, Sandy. Abby’s out in the car. I’ll call you in few days, and we can talk about David.”

Turning, he took a step toward the door, but she grabbed his arm, pulled him around, and kissed him full on the lips.

Tears wet her beautiful face. “Don’t, Buddy. Don’t go. Not now when—”

“No.” He shook his head and backed away a third time. “You’ll never know how sorry I am, Angel, but I’ve got to. Forgive me.”

She shifted the baby on her hip. “No, you don’t have to go! Not now. You know you love me more than her.”

“I do love you, that’s true enough.”

“Then stay. We can make it work.”

“Don’t you see? It can never work, Sandra Louise.”

“But why?”

The pain in her voice matched that in Buddy’s heart. He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. “God.”

“What’s He got to do with it?”

“He hates divorce, and it’s Him I love above all. You know what He did for us. You do understand, don’t you?”

She stared at him. The pain in her eyes deepened.

It broke his heart that he couldn’t make things right. He kissed his son then walked away without another word.

He was the chief of sinners, but like King David, he could choose to turn from his sins and walk upright in the sight of his Lord.

THE END

Please enjoy a look at the next story Son of Promise launching in

Chapter One

SON OF PROMISE

Travis leaned back in his favorite cane-bottomed porch chair and squinted against the coming day. All night, he'd searched for the right words. But what seemed to work in the darkness before dawn, paled with the day's first light.

"Oh, Lord, don't let me loose her." He slipped from his seat, spread his arms, then pressed his forehead against the cold stones. "I'll do anything you ask, Father. Just make her understand."

No audible answer came but a peace settled over him, a knowing that the Lord would go before him and prepare her. It soothed his troubled soul. He stood. "Thank you, Father."

Before he settled good back into his chair, the screen door flew open.

"Coffee, honey?" She held out his cup. Steam curled against the dark blue background of her dress.

"Thanks." For the first three sips, he didn't say a word. She rested her back against the porch post, half-sitting on the rail, and looked toward the rising sun. He figured he better be about it. "Might want to fetch your sewing kit."

She leaned toward him. "You got a button missing?"

"Yes, uh . . . no . . . best do as I ask though. I think you might be needing it." A grin played on the corner of her lips and mixed with a bit of fire in her eyes, but his nod sent her back in the house.

Too soon she settled in her chair, next to his, and opened the kit in her lap. "Okay, Buster Brown, why do I need my sewing kit?"

He drained his cup then faced her. "I was thinking you might want to roll yourself a cigarette."

Twice she opened her mouth, but no words came. Then with the other half of the grin he'd seen earlier, but without any fire, she dug out her fixings. "You dog."

"You know I love you, Emma Lee. Have from the first time I laid eyes on you, even if you were only fourteen."

She nodded then pulled the rice paper across her tongue. "So you've said. And?"

"Well, there was the four years I was waiting on you to grow up."

A serious dread blanketed all her playfulness. "What's this about,

Travis?"

He wiped his mouth. "One night after I'd taken a load of calves to the sale, I stopped in this roadhouse on the way home." He eyed her unlit smoke and thought about asking for one of his own.

A sick stomach wasn't worth the calming effect of the nicotine though. "Anyway, it was late, and this waitress and I got to talking and—"

"Hold it right there, mister." She waved her free hand. "If this was before we ever married, why are you bringing it up now? Just to torture me? I didn't even know you then. Don't worry about it."

She stood, fished a match from the bottom of her kit, and fired up the cigarette, inhaling deep then letting the smoke out slow. "I don't want to hear about some other woman. Don't say another word."

Travis rose to his feet. "Wish I didn't ever have to say anything about it, but I do."

"No. You don't. Not to me, anyway. If you feel the need to get something off your chest, go talk to Nathaniel or someone, but keep me out of it."

"Sit down, Em. I've got to tell you. Before I leave."

"Leave? Where are you going? How long you plan to be gone? Does this have something to do with that waitress? You going to see her or something?"

"Please, baby love, just sit down, would you?" He motioned toward her chair.

"Okay, fine. Here I sit. Now where do you think you're going? And what do you plan to do once you get there?"

"From that one time, Emma Lee, she got pregnant." He bit his lip then shook his head. "When I found out, I felt terrible. Of course, I offered to marry her, but she already had a husband—a trucker, drove long haul. She kept telling me it would be fine. Said neither him or the baby would ever know."



Once Emma Lee had been kicked in the stomach by a mule, but this was worse.

Not that her husband having a child was all that bad, but the knowing all the years they'd been trying for a baby had to be all her fault. At least that much was clear as a still pool. She chewed her nail.

One night with some roadhouse loosey-goosey was all it took for him to reproduce. She let the thought drift then took another drag. He sure was right about needing a smoke. Nasty habit, but how'd he know she'd started back anyway?

And that the fixings were in her sewing kit?

"Lord, Travis. Where are you going?"

"Austin. The boy can get out today, if I'll go sign for him."

"Get out of what?"

"Reform school."

She studied his face. The pain in his eyes tore at her heart, but the trouble he was aiming to bring on them chilled her more than skinny dipping in the creek on a winter morn.

"So, how old is this boy? And exactly what were you planning on doing with him after you sign? Are you going to be responsible for him or give him back to his mother? She going to be there?"

"Twelve. She's given up on him, Em. Won't be anywhere around. I'm thinking to bring him home. Bring him here."

She shook her head and sighed heavy. A twelve year old boy, and a trouble maker at that. That would change everything. There went her rainy days for sure.

Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she cleared her throat, took another puff, and kept her voice steady. "When you figure to be back with him?"

"Hoping we could both go; stop by your folks' on the way back."



Cody purposed not to look at the clock again.

No one was coming. He'd spend every single day of his life there until he was eighteen, so why even think about it? Just another rotten day in a long string of rotten egg days.

Man he needed a smoke. A drink would be even better. He'd give the last year of his life right then for a bottle of Jack and a pack of Camels. Better make it a carton and a case if he was talking a whole year.

He stole a glance at the clock then chided himself for looking. Four-thirty-two, exactly three minutes since the last time his eyes betrayed him and checked the stupid thing. Man he hated that place.

And he hated his mother for letting him rot there.

But most of all, he hated Mr. Travis Where-had-he-been-all-his-life Buckmeyer. If the man even really existed. His mom lied when there wasn't even no reason to.

He wouldn't put it past the old hag to have made the handsome lounge lizard up. Old bag probably sat in some bar that minute, laughing her bleached-blond head off.

A key turned in the lock then the dayroom's metal door swung open. Holding a clipboard, the matron stepped inside. "Get your bag and come with me."

Cody resisted the urge to jump up. He grabbed his duffel and strolled out of the room like he'd been leaving reform school every day of the week and twice on Sunday. A thousand questions vied for the asking, but he held his tongue.

Didn't figure to be staying long with ol' Bucky anyway. Nope. He had plenty of places to go and people to see.

After he followed her through the last locked door, it took every bit of restraint he could muster to keep from bolting, but that wasn't the time or place to run. He'd play it straight a day or two, get his bearings, then hitch a ride to Dallas.

Or maybe New Orleans.

Or anywhere.

Big for his age, he could pass for fourteen. No one asked anyway so long as he was willing to wash dishes or mop floors for two-bits.

"Cody." The matron nodded toward a couple standing next to the front door. "This is Mister and Miz Buckmeyer. You're to go with them." She bore into him with her pale blue eyes. "Mind yourself, Cody, and don't be coming back here."

He nodded then faced the man his mother had said was his father. "So you're Buckmeyer?"

"That'd be me. Come on, we're burning day light."



Emma Lee would have laughed at Travis quoting her father if the whole thing wasn't so ridiculous. Yesterday, just her and him, and she woke up to learn she was a step-mother to a half-grown boy.

Never could not remember a day that compared to that one, not ever. Then she laughed at herself. The day—or rather night—she and Travis got married might fit the ticket. One minute, not even thinking about getting hitched; next thing, the reverend pronounced her Mi'ess Travis Buckmeyer.

Things were repeating themselves.

Life with Travis Buckmeyer was a hoot.

At his pickup, she opened the passenger door. "You sit in the middle, Cody."

The boy grinned and raised that cocky little eyebrow just like Travis'. How'd he know? "Afraid I'll jump out or something?"

She let a surprised chuckle loose than gave him an amused smile. "No. I like sitting by the window. Cigarette smoke and your daddy don't mix."

Her dearest didn't say a word while navigating out of the city. Emma Lee liked the Capital well enough, but was past ready to get

gone. Even though she'd told her not to, Mama insisted on waiting supper.

Bet that went over big with Papa. She wondered how her parents were taking the news that Travis had a son. Guess she'd find out soon enough.

After her second cigarette, and still nary a word from father or son, she debated with herself on whether she should break the ice. But hey, she was only the step mother. Travis should be the one doing the talking.

But he hadn't said a word since leaving the school.

Oh, what a dreadful place. She'd felt it from the first, and it got worse the longer the stay.

Loads of paperwork preceded the lovely interview by the warden or whoever the guy was. She'd sure enjoy reforming that moron.

No one, but especially not a kid, should have to live in a place like that. Bless Cody's heart.

She stole a glance at the boy. One thing was certain, Travis sure couldn't deny this one.

A spitting image of his father, he'd inherited the same hair color, same nose, and same long lean body type—even the little eyebrow thing. The only real difference she could note was the color of their eyes.

She momentarily wished he was hers. She should be the one giving Travis a son, not some roadhouse floozy.

The thought screeched to a halt.

Not knowing Cody's mother, she certainly shouldn't be calling her names, no matter how much she hated her. No, she didn't hate her—only what she'd done. Dear God, how could the situation ever be right?

On the other side of the truck's window, Emma Lee's beloved hill country zoomed by. She brooded over the fine mess.

'If only' echoed, but as Travis turned off the highway onto the gravel road leading to Cypress Springs, she traced the 'if' all the way back to the night she said I do. Never in a hundred, never in a thousand, never in a million years would she ever wish that away, no matter what.

God's greatest gift to her was her husband.

The boy would be grown in a handful of years; she could stand anything so long as the Lord was on her side with plenty of mercy and grace--and help. "Help us, Lord, " she whispered.

Travis would make a wonderful father. Of that, she was sure He eased to a stop next to Papa's Ford sedan then faced the boy.

"Emma's folks invited us for supper. If you've learned any manners in these twelve years, Cody, I expect you to use them."



A half-dozen smart-alecky retorts popped to mind, but Cody heard his own self saying “Yes, Sir” instead.

Fried chicken, cream gravy, homemade rolls, corn on the cob, fresh snapped green beans, orange Jello with peach halves in it, sliced and peeled garden tomatoes, and two kinds of pie got washed down with all the sweet milk he wanted.

Man, if Emma Lee cooked half as good as her mother, why, he might have to stick around a few extra days, put a little traveling meat on his bones.

Though he didn’t much care for the old man eyeing him hard all the time, he would have liked playing with little David some. He was a cutie, and Cody and him could be buds.

If it wasn’t so obvious Mister John Harris didn’t want the likes of Cody’s jailbird-self anywhere near the little prince—like he’d corrupt the kid or something. Good grief, he needed a break.

No, he needed a smoke. That’s what he needed.

How could he get his hands on one of his dad’s mis’ess’ ready-rolls?

Like the man expected, Cody acted on his best behavior, spoke only when spoken to, pleased-and-thank-you-ed until his jaw hurt, even passed up the opportunity to swipe a nifty pair of spurs when no one was looking.

He could have boosted them, no doubt, but where could he have kept them hid?

After a lot of false starts, Travis finally got them in the truck and on the way to wherever they called home. Cody liked Emma Lee’s mama real well and even let the old lady hug him. Shook Mister John’s hand, too.

Not that he respected the old coot, but the man had said to use his manners.

Once back on the highway, he tried to get a handle on exactly where Buckmeyer was taking him, but once it got good and dark, he lost all sense of direction and in the end, decided it didn’t really matter so much.

Only needed the highway where he could hitch a ride to his new life once he was ready. Couldn’t be that far away. He looked forward to that life where he was the boss, and no one told him he wasn’t old enough.

He’d smoke or drink or do anything he wanted. No wardens, no school marms, no plastered mothers—and no long-lost dads.

Images of his new existence drifted across his inner eye. He

slumped a bit in the seat then let his head rest on Emma Lee's shoulder. He dozed in and out a while, then the man turned off the black top onto a gravel road.

The rocks hitting the truck's underside jarred him awake, but that was good. This was the part he needed to pay close attention to anyway.

He read how once when pirates kidnapped Caesar, he memorized the number of coves his abductors passed before they reached their hideout. He would do the same, except no one would be looking to ransom him or help him get away.

No, he'd have to be the one to free his own self, but he was up for the job and planned to skedaddle soon as he was ready.

Two lefts and a right later, he figured it must be close, but then Buckmeyer made three more turns so fast Cody couldn't be sure of the right order right when he repeated them to himself.

Finally, he turned into a recessed entrance, skidded the truck to a stop, jumped out then jogged ahead and opened the gate.

"I could have got that."

Emma Lee patted his leg. "Travis is funny about gates, likes to do them himself. Plus, he's usually saving me from the chore although I'd be happy to help him, too. He's a good man, Cody. And I think he's a little excited about having you here with us. You know, he came as soon as he found out where you were and that he could get you."

"Did you already know about me?"

"No, he told me this morning. Talked to your mother yesterday and went today to get you. Didn't let any grass grow before he had you with him."

"She ain't no mother. Never was."

The man jumped in, eased through, then got back out.

She patted his leg again. "Well, this is your new home. Hope you like it."

A part of him wanted to believe. He'd never had a real home.

The shack his old lady lived in sure didn't qualify, and he doubted this place ever would either. The pickup bumped and wound its way along a dirt trail, dodged a few cows, then after what had to be more than a couple of miles, its headlamps illuminated a monster of a house.

Looked like one of the rich folks' mansions. Buckmeyer pulled around back then parked the truck under a carport next to a sporty looking coupe. They must be rich. For a moment, Cody sat there.

She said the man wanted him there. He steadied his bottom lip quick and pretended he got something in his eye, hopping out of the truck. Sure didn't want them to see any tears and think he was some kind of sissy.

He hurried to the back and retrieved his duffel bag that carried all his worldly belongings.

Could it be possible he'd fit here? He never fit anywhere before.

No. Couldn't back down.

He'd be leaving and on his own in no time. Hadn't had a dad for almost thirteen years, didn't need one then. He didn't like the boonies, and he didn't like cows. Hey, but that was one shiny little red coupe.

Maybe, if he could get his hands on a key . . .

Son of Promise will launch in January 2018

Caryl's Titles' Five-Star Reviews



Historical Texas Romances

...for [Vow Unbroken](#)

With an intriguing plot line and well-developed characters, McAdoo, who's written nonfiction and children's fiction, delivers an engaging read for her first adult historical romance.

--*Publishers Weekly*

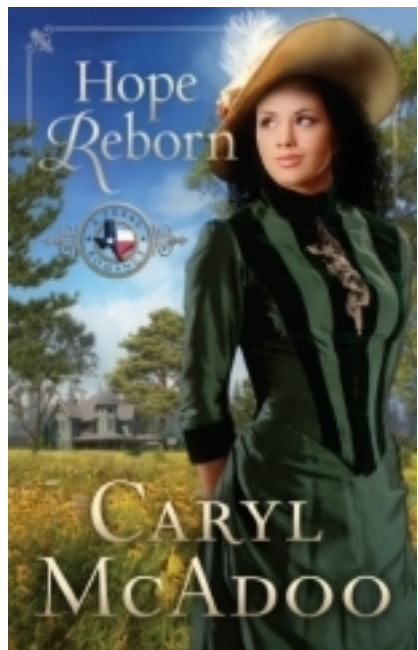
After reading Caryl McAdoo's story of Henry and Susannah in "VOW UNBROKEN," I felt like I'd had another adventure with Tom Sawyer and Becky, this time as young adults. --Alan Daugherty: columnist *The News-Banner*



...for [Hearts Stolen](#)

Get ready for a wild, uplifting, heart-tugging, page-turning ride. *Hearts Stolen* grabbed me at the start. Sassy's feisty, fighting spirit...I couldn't set it down. Burnt dinner, but forget eating, I ate this book up. This master storyteller weaves Texas history into a well-crafted plot with unforgettable and totally loved characters. --Holly Michael, author

[Crooked Lines](#)



...for [Hope Reborn](#)

With memorable characters, Caryl's signature humor, and plenty of

adventure, drama, and romance, “Hope Reborn” is anything but fluff. A strong message of salvation runs through, but well within the storyline. Enjoyed a unique twist with May writing the stories of the previous characters – clever and fun!

--Pam Morrison, Tennessee reader



... [Sins of the Mothers](#)

I tell you what, folks, this girl can write! I do love this series, and maybe most especially this book. Mary Rachel Buckmeyer can out-negotiate the experts, out-guess marketing trends, and out-stubborn a mule. Trouble is, she tends to follow her heart into disaster. The guy she marries has meandering eye, lies like a braided rug, and has all the loyalty of a new-born pup. Mary hops from one frying pan to another until one man shows up who could steady her and get her out of the fixes she gets herself into. Such a great story! I know you'll love.

--Anne Baxter Campbell, author *The Truth Trilogy: The Roman's Quest, Marcus Varitor, Centurion*, and *The Truth Doesn't Die*



...[Daughters of the Heart](#)

A fun packed Christian romance novel with plenty of action, heartbreak, tears, deception, twists, and turns. [The three sisters] made a pact never to break their father's heart, but when suitors show up, it's hard for them to stay determined. Will they find true love? Will Dad accept a suitor for them and give his blessings?

--Joy Gibson, a Tennessee

reader and pastor's wife



...for [Just Kin](#)

I have followed this historical romance series from the beginning and they just keep getting better. Lacey Rose loves Charley and is devastated when he leaves to fight for Texas with the Confederate army. Charley doesn't realize Lacey Rose is in love with him but is both surprised and pleased with the goodbye kiss she gives him. after Charley sends a hurtful letter trying to discourage her from waiting for him, Lacey Rose runs away and ends up in all kinds of trouble. Charley also stirs up some trouble of his own when he begins looking for her. Don't miss out on this book. I loved it!

--Louise Koiner, Texas beta reader



....[At Liberty to Love](#)

This was one of the best books I have ever read. The characters got so close to your heart you wish they were your family. From the beginning till the end you fell in love with each of them. The two adopted baby boys brought laughs and joy. The love story has strong Christian threads throughout. Highly recommend this book. You will love it.

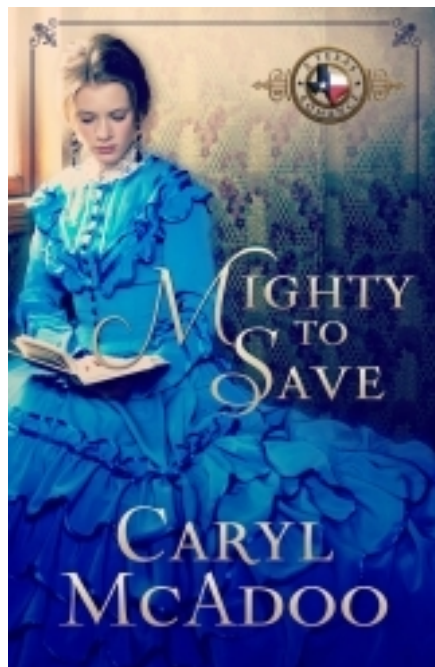
--Jane Moody, reader



...Covering Love

This was one of the best books I have ever read. The characters got so close to your heart you wish they were your family. From the beginning till the end you fell in love with each of them. The two adopted baby boys brought laughs and joy. The love story has strong Christian threads throughout. Highly recommend this book. You will love it.

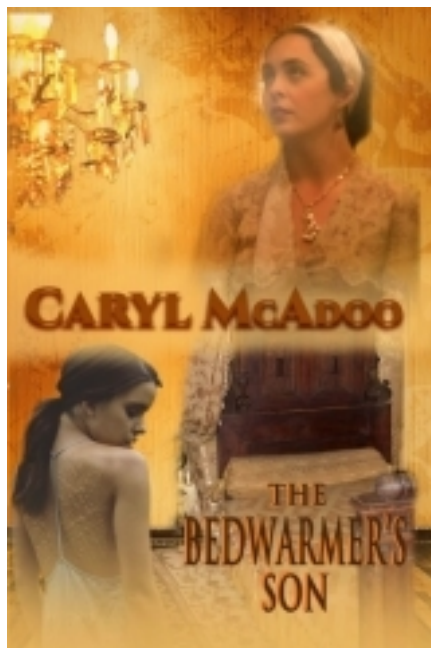
--Jane Moody, reader



...[Mighty to Save](#)

Mighty to Save is one of the best books I've read, filled with characters who become friends. Emotions and all my senses were right there for the beatings, the tent revival scenes, the romance and heartache. Tears, praising, singing in the Spirit are throughout this magnificent, powerful, heartfelt, sensational story. Caryl McAdoo is one gifted author. Mighty to Save is going to be used for His glory.

– Marilyn Ridgway, a reader



Son...The Bedwarmer's

I really loved this book...didn't want to put it down. I love the way it's different than most historical romance novels, and I read many. I loved the way the author used the old man to tell Jasmine's story. I also loved both Wills' stories. Being a Christian novel just made it better. I enjoyed it so much I hated to see it end. This is the first novel I've ever read by this author, but I doubt it will be my last.

-- BJ Robinson, Author of *River*

Oaks Plantation, Siege of Azalea Plantation, Azalea Plantation and others

Contemporary Red River Romances



...*The Preacher's Faith*

This was my first book to read by Caryl McAdoo and I absolutely loved it. I will be reading more. I love the way she prays that her story gives God Glory and dedicates The Preacher's Faith to Him and His Kingdom...a good clean book to read. I was drawn into this story right from the start. I loved this book and can't wait for book two.

--Elizabeth Dent, Alabama reader



...for *Sing a New Song*

Sing a New Song is a delightful breath of air. Caryl eloquently brings her audience nearer to God [with] fresh ways of viewing

Christian life and all it offers. The characters are loveable and humorous. Illuminating, the story shares the Gospel beautifully. Samuel's sermons as well as the gorgeous lyrics of Mary Esther's songs fill our hearts with newfound worship. Truly an inspiring tale. Christian fiction in its best; a romantic love story that brings its readers closer to God. A treasure for sure.

--Christine Barber, author of *Broken to Pieces*



...for *One and Done*

Faster than a major league outfielder pulling down a popup fly ball, this romance is guaranteed to snag baseball lovers and romance readers alike. Written with wit, verve and Caryl's usual flare for dialect and spicy dialogue, this is no saccharine, man-meets-woman story sanitized romantic fairytale, but so real in the mind, you can almost smell locker room sweat or mouthwatering scent of Mexican food. Identification with the hero and heroine is nearly immediate. With so much to rave about, I cannot begin to cover all the delightful surprises, so the reader simply must buy "One and Done" to see for themselves.

--Cass Wessel, multi-published author of devotions

Contemporary Apple Orchard Romance



...for *Lady Luck's a Loser*

A very unique, witty plot. I couldn't put it down. I love that my favorite characters are still active at the end of the book, only their relationships have changed. What a way for Dub to fulfill his promises to his deceased wife. Love, trust, forgiveness, and many emotions make for a well written book.

--Joy Gibson, Tennessee

The Generations Biblical fiction



...for [A Little Lower Than the Angels](#) Caryl McAdoo used her research and knowledge of biblical scripture combined with an incredible imagination as a foundation to fill in the gaps of the story of Adam and Eve and their children. I was caught up in the story from page one to the ending. I particularly appreciated the "Search the Scriptures" section at the end which explains some of the Biblical clues for this work of fiction. I loved it and highly recommend it. --Judy Levine, reader, Arizona

...for [Then the Deluge Comes](#)



Deluge is the second book in The Generations Series, and if the books still to follow are as good as this one and the first one in the series are it is going to be an incredible series. The author has a way of breathing life and emotions into the characters that made me feel like I was on the sidelines watching their stories unfold. This is some of the best Biblical fiction that I have read and I look forward to the rest of the series. I was furnished with an e-copy of the book in return for an honest review. --Ann Ellison, reader, Texas

... for Replenish the Earth



Caryl tells the story of the flood in such a unique way.. I like how she makes the characters so real. This Bible story just comes to life. Noah's family on the Ark taking care of the animals and then when they come to a stop, starting all over on a barren earth. I found that the family conversations, their actions and the descriptions just made this more real to me. I like that Caryl gives scripture references and her thoughts at the end of the book.

--Deanna Stevens, reader, Nebraska

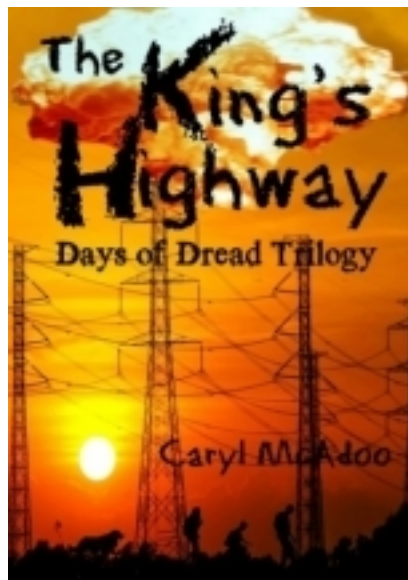


...for [Children of Eber](#)

So much of the tale remains faithful to the Scriptural account, but where there is silence, Caryl's author voice sings through in delicious detail. For the reader familiar with the Biblical account, she fleshes out a mere paragraph or two until the narrative vibrates with life. As if transported through a time machine, the reader reenters the world of the Ancients experiencing their lives and seeing their surroundings afresh. Those who know the Biblical account will delight in following the ancient pair into Egypt, then back to Canaan again.

--Cass Wessel, devotional author

Mid-Grade that Grandparents love



... The King's Highway

I can't remember when I have enjoyed reading a book as much as this one. If I really like a book, I can read it in a day. I read this twice in two days. I couldn't quit reading. It has to be right up there with my all-time favorites. If anyone thinks they won't read it because it's for mid-grade, I encourage you to reconsider. You'll miss a blessing. Anyone reading age from the mid grades to senior citizens (that's me) will love this book. The characters in the book are delightful. --

Louise Koiner, reader, Texas



Non-Fiction

Style, The Craft of Writing Creative Fiction

...*Story &*

This is a wonderful book for those wanting to learn more about writing. I know from experience. The content helped me tremendously!! It especially helped me gain a clear picture of POV and the use of action versus attribution to strengthen my writing and make my debut book the best it can be. Thank you, Caryl, your continued helping hands are a blessing to many of us rookie writers!

--Andy Skrzynski, author of

The New World, A Step Backward

Coming Soon...

Historical

Son of Promise, Texas Romance companion / 2018

The Revivalist, Texas Romance companion

Contemporary Romance

The Pitch

King of Texas, starring Patrick Henry Buckmeyer

III

Biblical Fiction

I AM My Beloved

Mid-grade & Young Adult, Grandparents, too!

Days of Dread Trilogy

The Sixth Trumpet book two

Compelled by a vision, Jackson Allison leaves the safety of Red River County on a quest to free his mother from the clutches of a traitorous double agent. Accompanied by Albert Einstein Hawking, his personal nerd, and the Great Pyrenees guardian, Boggs, the high school freshman must elude Communist patrols, slavers, and bangers.

The Kidron Valley book three

By day, Jackson Allison fights alongside his grandfather, uncles, and other red-neck defenders of the cattle and grain rich Red River County. Plagued by dreams of his dad by night, he somehow joins his father's Marine unit that's fighting the last great battle between good and evil in the Kidron Valley. It seems so real, but how can it be?

River Bottom Ranch Stories

The Adventures of Sergeant Socks, The Journey Home

An orphan colt gets lost in a storm and faces many dangers trying to find his way home.

The Adventures of Sergeant Socks, The Bravest Heart

Sarge is a year older, but is he wiser? He and Uncle Dan are stolen

from the rodeo, but what the thieves don't know is that two of the grandsons were hiding in the trailer! Now the boys have to save the horses and the horses have to rescue the boys!

Amazing Graci, Guardian of the River Bottom Goats

The Great Pyrenees has a job and cannot be sidetracked from protecting the herd of goats. And there's a mangy half coyote running the river bottoms whose favorite meal is . . . goats!

The Texas Romance Family Sagas

Book #1 *VOW UNBROKEN*, 1832

Book #2 *HEARTS STOLEN*, 1839-1844

Book #3 *HOPE REBORN*, 1850-1851

Book #4 *SINS OF THE MOTHERS*, 1851-1852

Book #5 *DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART*, 1853-1854

Book #6 *JUST KIN*, 1861-1865

Book #7 *AT LIBERTY TO LOVE* 1865-1866

Book # 8 *COVERING LOVE* 1885-1886

Book #9 *MIGHTY TO SAVE* 1850-60s & 1918-1925

Book #10 *CHIEF OF SINNERS* 1926-1950

Companion books:

THE BEDWARMER'S SON 1857 & 1928- (parallel stories)

SON OF PROMISE 1951

THE REVIVALIST 1967

Reach out to the author!...

Website <http://www.CarylMcAdoo.com>

Newsletter <http://tinyurl.com/TheCaryler>
(Get FREE books for subscribing!)

YouTube <http://bit.ly/2qGJoToBlog> (Caryl's new songs!)

Blogs <http://www.CarylMcAdoo.blogspot.com>
Heart“wings” Blog

Facebook www.facebook.com/CarylMcAdoo.author

Twitter <http://www.twitter.com/CarylMcAdoo>

GoodReads <http://tinyurl.com/GoodReadsCaryl>

Google + <http://tinyurl.com/CarylsGooglePlus>

Pinterest <http://www.pinterest.com/CarylMcAdoo>

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Author Pages : *(please follow)*

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Email CarylMcAdoo@gmail.com

Author reaching out to you!

Hey dear Readers!

What a blessing and gift from God you are! I'm so grateful that you've stepped out to read my novel and hope you enjoyed the story and found it gives God glory! My desire is that each one brings you closer to Him and offers scriptural principles and issues to ponder and

live by.

If you indeed enjoy the stories, I could use your help in spreading the word of these Kingdom books! To stay on top of all my news (debuts, sales, awards) to share with your reading friends, I encourage you to [subscribe to *The Caryler*](#), my quarterly newsletter. I try to make it fun with news, scripture, lyrics, including a few of my favorite things.

Speaking of lyrics, I'm so blessed that God gives me new songs! There's nothing I love more than praising and worshiping Him with music which lends to being called the Singing Pray-er. Now you can hear them at my [YouTube](#) channel! Please subscribe so you won't miss any new songs!

Reviews are so important to authors, so it'll be a big boon if you could take the time to leave a quick review (doesn't have to be long) at [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), your blog, and anywhere you enjoy reading about books. Click "Follow" while you're there, too!□

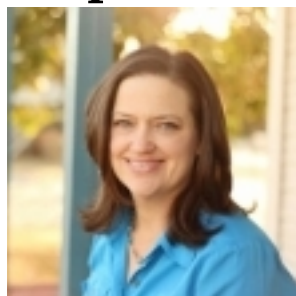
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I love hearing from you and have a group of special readers who help me more than most. Let me know if you'd like to join my Christian eVALUaters review crew.

Stop by my [Facebook](#) page; I just love connecting! Just search Caryl McAdoo. And last but not never least, I pray that God will bless you as you have blessed me, that His favor will envelope all you do!

Love in Christ and many blessings, **Cayl**

A few links Others might find helpful:



Needing help with your online presence? Go to [Rocksteady Resolutions](#) for websites, email lists, and all social media and marketing assistance. CEO Janis McAdoo (my daughter-in-love) is knowledgeable, energetic, and full of integrity. She'll be a God-sent blessing to you!

Have a Book you want to Promote or Publish? I highly recommend [Celebrate Lit Publishing](#)

Subscribe to receive free and low-cost Christian books in your Inbox!
[The Celebration Reading Room](#)

Facebook groups I love:

[CRAVE HIM!](#) = Christian Readers & Authors Visitation Events! He Inspires Me! Events for readers to spend a fun day with favorite authors. See when and where the next one is!

[Christian Indie Books](#) great place to find books bargains and new authors (sometimes even FREE)

[Christian Indie Authors Readers Group](#) another great place to meet new authors and book deals (FREE, too, sometimes)

[5-Star Reviews of Christian Fiction](#): Find readers' favorites here! Join and post your own reviews of books you love!

Blogs:

[Heart“wings” Blog](#) with wonderful daily devotionals that amazingly seem to be exactly what readers need to hear that very day!

[CRAVE HIM! Blog](#)

[Stitches Thru Time](#)

[Sweet American Sweethearts](#)